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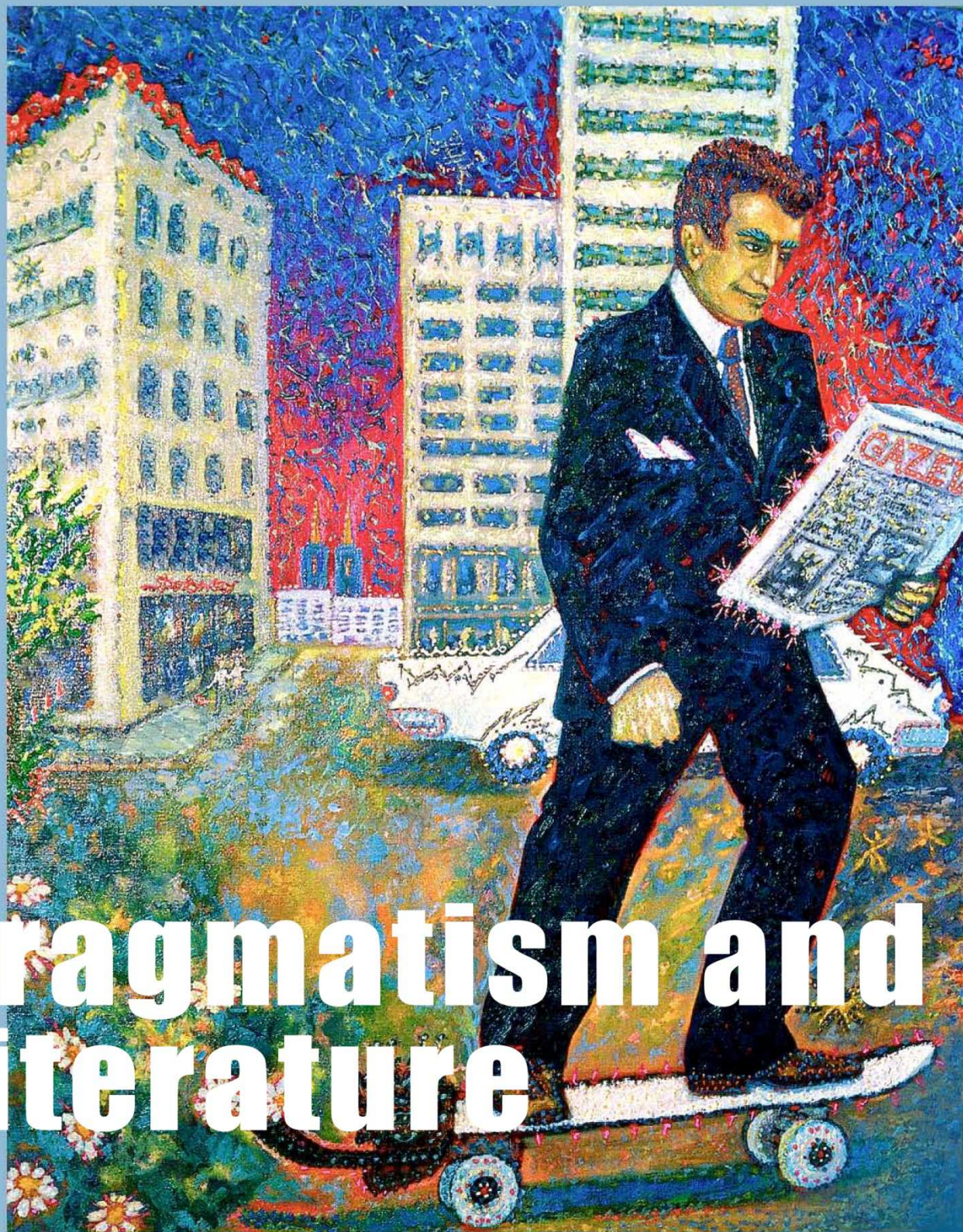
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# Pragmatism and Literature



**Volume2, Issue2 Winter 2011**





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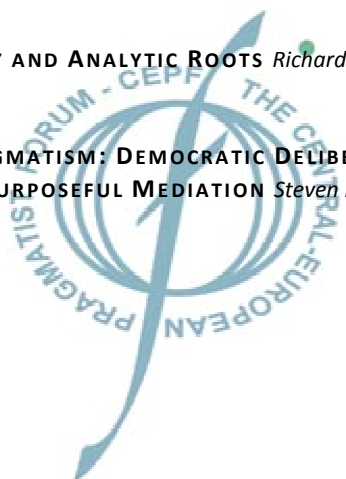
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## THINGS “TOO AMORPHOUS TO TALK ABOUT”:

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON PRAGMATISM AND

### LITERATURE

**Wojciech Mątecki**

*University of Wrocław*

Suppose we were to make a survey among literary scholars asking what they first associate with the phrase “pragmatism and literature.” It is highly probable, I suggest, that the most frequent reply would be “Richard Rorty” – a hypothesis that is based on the simple fact that the latter immensely contributed to all sorts of “turns” that define the recent history of literary studies. And thus, with his seminal *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and subsequent works, Rorty not only singlehandedly revived philosophers’ interest in pragmatism,<sup>1</sup> but also helped to establish it as a powerful option within literary theory, opening the way for the so-called *pragmatist* turn, associated with the likes of Stanley Fish, Giles Gunn, Steven Mailloux, Richard Shusterman, and others.<sup>2</sup> With his unique combination of Davidsonian semantics and a Bloomian conception of misreading, and with the resulting radical pronouncements on the nature of literary interpretation, he became one of the primary architects of the *interpretive* turn.<sup>3</sup> By constantly emphasizing literature’s potential to help us in our personal quest for self-

perfection and in making us more sensitive to the suffering of others, he laid some of the foundations for the so-called turn to *ethics*,<sup>4</sup> and due to his penchant for deflating the overblown balloon of literary theory, he found himself in the eye of the storm that has come to be known as theory wars.<sup>5</sup> Quite naturally, then, if there is any pragmatist philosopher whom the majority of literary scholars must have heard of it is Richard Rorty. Rorty, to put it another way, is *the* pragmatist philosopher of literature.<sup>6</sup>

Yet interestingly, in a 2002 interview conducted by E. P. Ragg, Rorty made it clear that he thought pragmatism and literature were “too amorphous to talk about,”<sup>7</sup> which was perhaps meant as an explanation for his all too visible uneasiness toward the reviewer’s questions on the relations between the two. What makes this even more curious, however, is that in his own texts Rorty did not hesitate to talk in quite general terms about *both* literature and pragmatism, and even placed the latter in the title of one of his books.<sup>8</sup> So can one talk about such

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., William Egginton and Mike Sandbothe, eds., *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> For an account of this turn and Rorty’s role in it, see Leszek Drog, *Disciplining the New Pragmatism: Theory, Rhetoric, and the Ends of Literary Study* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007). See also Richard Shusterman, “Beneath Interpretation, Against Hermeneutic Holism,” *The Monist*, vol. 73 (1990), pp. 181-204; Steven J. Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Stanley Fish, “Truth and Toilets,” in Morris Dickstein (ed.), *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 418-433.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., James Bohman, David. R. Hiley, and Richard Shusterman, eds., *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Lawrence Buell, “Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics,” *PMLA*, no. 1 (1999), pp. 7-16; and Peter Johnson, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel: A Study of Winch, Nussbaum, and Rorty* (Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Richard Rorty, “Philosophy without Principles,” in: *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 132-138. Cf. Richard Rorty, “Looking Back at Literary Theory,” in: *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 63-67. For a criticism of Rorty’s “anti-theory,” see Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 54-58, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Even if he himself would reject that label, for reasons that should become clear as this paper unfolds. See, e.g., Richard Rorty and E. P. Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?: The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty,” in: *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Actually, these words belong to the reviewer, who explicitly asks Rorty whether he deems pragmatism and literature “too amorphous to talk about,” to which the latter responds with a simple: “Yes.” Rorty and Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?,” p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

things as pragmatism and literature or not? How is one to make sense of all this? Or maybe one shouldn't try to do so at all, contenting oneself with the thought that Rorty is after all well-known for his inconsistency?

I believe that one should try indeed as there are important lessons to be learned from picking apart Rorty's position. First of all, it is imperative to observe that as a self-described “nominalist,” Rorty would sometimes express doubts about the usefulness of such general notions as philosophy and literature, or even some slightly less general ones such as pragmatism, novel, and poetry.<sup>9</sup> What lurked behind this was the contention that the things we call “philosophy,” “literature,” “pragmatism,” and “the novel” embrace so many different phenomena, and have undergone so many and such dizzying transformations in the past,<sup>10</sup> that if we try to define them in terms of some unchanging necessary and sufficient conditions we will unavoidably end up “kicking up dust and then complaining that we cannot see.”<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Rorty needed the general notions of such things. He needed them in order to spin his favored sweeping narratives of the cultural history of the West (narratives of the fall of “redemptive truth” and the rise of “literary culture,”<sup>12</sup> or of the struggles between

novelists and ascetic priests<sup>13</sup>), which he perceived as essential to the project of philosophy understood as cultural politics; the most useful kind of philosophy he was able to imagine. Therefore, he kept on referring to “literature,” “pragmatism,” and “philosophy” in his works, admitting, however, that he does so “to the extent” that one can talk about them.<sup>14</sup> To the extent, that is, that they can be redefined in appropriately historicist terms.

What this means is probably best illustrated by the following clarifying remarks Rorty made in response to a letter by the Indian philosopher Anindita Niyogi Balslev. Namely, while in his infamous essay “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing” (1978),<sup>15</sup> Rorty referred to philosophy as a “genre of discourse,” which might “suggest” that it possesses a set of ahistorical, formal features, he “did not mean to do that.”<sup>16</sup> For, as he explained, we should understand philosophy instead as a fluctuating cultural tradition that consists of a string of authors referring, explicitly or implicitly, to some particular figures rather than others. We should see it, indeed, as “a family romance” that includes people who always have “Father Parmenides” or “honest old uncle Kant” in the back of their heads (the way one cannot avoid having one's parents and siblings somewhere in one's mind whatever

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Richard Rorty, “Responses to Critics,” in: *Rorty, Pragmatism, and Confucianism*, ed. Yong Huang (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), pp. 292, 296. See also Rorty and Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?,” p. 140. Cf. Richard Rorty, “Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and Postmodernism,” in: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 262-277.

<sup>10</sup> See also Rorty and Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?,” p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> This is actually a phrase Rorty used in a different context, but it nevertheless perfectly describes the position I am referring to above. See Richard Rorty, “Response to Richard Shusterman,” in: *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, ed. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 257.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 89-104.

<sup>13</sup> See Richard Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” in: *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 66-82. Cf. Wojciech Mątecki, “Ascetic Priests and O'Briens: Sadism and Masochism in Rorty's Writings,” *Angelaki: The Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, no. 3 (2009), pp. 101-115; and idem, “What Do Thermonuclear Bombs Have to Do with Intercultural Hermeneutics (Or on the Superiority of Dickens over Heidegger),” *Human Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2011), pp. 395-404.

<sup>14</sup> Rorty, “Responses to Critics,” p. 292.

<sup>15</sup> See Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,” *New Literary History*, vol. X (1978-79), pp. 141-160; reprinted in: Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 90-109.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, “Letter 4,” in: Anindita Niyogi Balslev, *Cultural Otherness: Correspondence with Richard Rorty* (Atlanta: Scholars Press 1999), p. 67.

## THINGS “TOO AMORPHOUS TO TALK ABOUT”:

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON PRAGMATISM AND LITERATURE *Wojciech Małecki*

one does),<sup>17</sup> with pragmatism being a sub-romance in which James, Dewey, and Putnam figure more prominently than other thinkers. Ditto for literature, the only difference being that the characters in *this* story are instead Sophocles, Rabelais, Proust, and Wallace Stevens.<sup>18</sup> The literary and philosophical traditions are obviously to an extent entangled with each other, just like some families are, but just as is the case with the latter, one can talk about separate “ancestral” lines with regard to the former too. Having thus formulated his historicist/genealogical position, Rorty would sometimes stray from it in his later texts, yet had he been asked about this, I suppose, he would still have responded that that stance was his official one.

Official or not, his historicist take on literature and philosophy allows us not only to grasp in a more precise manner Rorty’s admitting that pragmatism and literature are too “amorphous” to talk about, but also partly understand his skepticism, expressed in the same interview, toward the idea of a “dialogue” between them.<sup>19</sup> To understand it fully, however, necessitates taking a closer look at the peculiar context of the conversation between Rorty and Ragg. And peculiar it is because Ragg’s apparent presumption that pragmatism, as an important philosophical movement, must automatically be important for literary studies<sup>20</sup> led to a somewhat comical situation where he was trying to convince Rorty of that very view, while the latter, despite himself being a pragmatist philosopher interested in all things literary, desperately tried to contradict it, up to the point of pronouncing that we had better not “give pragmatism more of an importance that it should claim.”<sup>21</sup> Why did Rorty react in such a way? If he cared so much about pragmatism, then why, as his

words seem to suggest, didn’t he want to cement its influence in literary studies?

The main reason is that the notion, widespread in the humanities and, one suspects, underpinning Ragg’s thinking, that philosophy is somehow a fundamental discipline to which all scholars need look up to (philosophy as *regina scientiarum*),<sup>22</sup> constituted to Rorty a veritable anathema; a clear example of what he called vertical thinking<sup>23</sup> and openly fought against in his works. On a more concrete level, he lamented what he saw as the perversions of philosophically oriented literary theory, such as the overproduction of tedious literary criticism (which mechanically applies some philosophical “principles” in analyzing literary works),<sup>24</sup> and, related to that, many a literary critic’s inability to acknowledge, and to help her readers understand, the inspirational value of the great works of literature.<sup>25</sup>

In a word, Rorty wanted to convey his contention that to talk about pragmatism *and* literature “in general,” in the sense of pragmatist philosophy as a whole<sup>26</sup> providing a systematic account of literature as a whole (something which would constitute a sort of “pragmatist literary theory”) seemed to him rather pointless.<sup>27</sup> What he saw as more sensible, on the contrary, was using concrete insights taken from a given philosopher – not necessarily a pragmatist, to address concrete problems encountered

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p.52-53.

<sup>23</sup> See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 96-97; Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp. 82-3, 265-6; Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 214. Cf. Małecki, “Ascetic Priests and O’Briens,” pp. 101-104.

<sup>24</sup> Rorty and Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?,” p. 127, 137. Cf. Wojciech Małecki, “Dethroning the Dark God of Absence: On Rorty, de Man, and Unreadability,” *The Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2011), in particular, pp. 91-92.

<sup>25</sup> See Richard Rorty, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature,” in: *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 125-140.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing,” p. 92. See also Rorty, “Letter 4,” p. 67; Rorty and Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?,” p. 133

<sup>18</sup> Rorty and Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?,” p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135, 143

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137. See also pp. 142-143.



in studying a given novel or a poem.<sup>28</sup> However, this would be sensible only on the proviso that the situation demanded it (because the resources available to literary scholars in their own discipline, or the resources of disciplines other than philosophy, proved insufficient), and not because consulting philosophy, rather than, say, psychology, art history, physiology, botany, parasitology or seismology, were to be a default reaction in all circumstances.

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The essays in this special issue of *Pragmatism Today* correspond with the aforementioned views of Rorty's in at least a few ways. For one, some of them (e.g., Bartczak's and Drong's) touch on the question of the possibilities and limitations of employing theory in literary studies, with Richard Hart's text explicitly addressing Rorty's worries about improperly used theory's hampering inspired readings of literature. Some others, and some of the same too, illustrate, whether their authors intended that or not, the fact that pragmatism and literature may sometimes seem so “amorphous,” or “omnivorous,”<sup>29</sup> that it is hard to decide what their exact boundaries are.

Consider the well-known example of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose work constitutes the subject of John Lysaker's paper and appears in Bartczak's too. Was Emerson a pragmatist (a proto-pragmatist, if you will), or not? The debate seems to be endless, with the likes of Cornel West<sup>30</sup> and Richard Shusterman<sup>31</sup> favoring the former option, and Stanley Cavell asking skeptically

“what's the use” of doing so.<sup>32</sup> Having died before the term “pragmatism,” in its philosophical meaning, first appeared in print, Emerson obviously could not have applied that label to his own thought. But what to do with such authors as Gerald Graff (to whom Leszek Drong devotes his contribution), who have had this possibility yet failed to do so despite the many similarities one might observe between their position and that of “card-carrying” pragmatists such as Dewey? Or what about the relation between analytic philosophy and pragmatism, which is often depicted as uniformly antagonistic? At least in the sense that, as the common opinion has it, the unstoppable expansion of the latter in American philosophy departments after WWII meant the former's (temporary) demise, and that when Rorty converted from his analytic creed to a pragmatist one in the 80s, he became a sort of *bête noir* in the analytic circles. This picture has been rightly questioned by various authors before<sup>33</sup> and is further undermined, in this issue, by Richard Shusterman's pointing to the analytic roots of his own pragmatist take on literature.

The word “roots” brings us back to Rorty's historicizing approach, which allows one to ease these and analogous problems by locating the figures they involve in a genealogical narrative, such as that, for instance, which may be traced from Emerson through James and Dewey to Rorty himself. Of course, Cavell is right in insisting that there are some irremediable differences between the work of Emerson and, say, that of Dewey, but, as has been stressed by other scholars, upon a closer exposition one finds enough similarities between the two to be able to include both men in the same, pragmatist family.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 129, 141.

<sup>29</sup> This latter adjective I borrow from Stanley Fish, who so described pragmatism in his “Truth and Toilets” (p. 424).

<sup>30</sup> See Cornel West, “The Emersonian Prehistory of Pragmatism,” in: *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 9–41.

<sup>31</sup> See Richard Shusterman, “Emerson's Pragmatist Aesthetics,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, No. 207 (1999), pp. 87–99.

<sup>32</sup> See Stanley Cavell, “What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?,” in: *The Revival of Pragmatism*, pp. 72–80.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Vincent Colapietro, “The Question of Voice and the Limits of Pragmatism: Emerson, Dewey, and Cavell,” in: *The Range of Pragmatism and the Limits of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 174–196.

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Rorty's approach can also justify to an extent the inclusion in this issue of Steven Mailloux's paper devoted to rhetoric. True, it would be folly to deny that rhetoric cannot be entirely equated with literature, insofar as today we do not consider all rhetorical uses of language as literary. Yet it would be equally absurd to question that, historically speaking, the tradition of the *ars bene dicendi* and the literary one have always been tightly knit together,<sup>35</sup> as evidenced, for instance, by the fact that some historical figures, such as Horace, belong to both, not to mention that some of the most famous *contemporary* students of rhetoric have also been literary critics or even poets (Kenneth Burke being a good case in point).

Finally, instead of typifying what Rorty despised about theoretically-minded literary scholarship, the contributions to this issue are rather good instances of what he thought to be theory's value. Quite in keeping with the general reactive character of his discourse, Rorty outlined his idea of that value in response to Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp's diatribe entitled bluntly “Against Theory,”<sup>36</sup> asserting that he sees it in literary theory's giving us a possibility of creatively “splicing together [our] favorite critics, novelists, poets, and such, and [our] favorite philosophers.”<sup>37</sup>

This is in a way what the contributions to this issue do. Richard Hart's essay, for instance, functions as a locus of interaction between John Steinbeck on the one hand and Rorty on the other; John Lysaker's text does the same for Walt Whitman, Robert Pinsky, and Emerson; and Tim Milnes' for the English Romantics and Rorty, which notably leads to an intriguing exercise in what can only be called comparative literary botany (a comparison

between Rorty's meditation on orchids in one of his autobiographical texts and Wordsworth's famous verses on the pansy in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality”). In a word, the contributions to this issue of *Pragmatism Today* play off some ideas derived from a philosophical tradition (pragmatism, that is) against some themes, figures, and works belonging to a family romance known as literature (or to such cultural traditions as literary criticism and rhetoric). But what is perhaps most important, as a result, they shed a new light on all elements of the resulting unique constellation.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., George Maximilian Antony Grube, *The Greek and Roman Critics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. x.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory,” in: *Against Theory*, pp. 11-30.

<sup>37</sup> Rorty, “Philosophy without Principles,” p. 136. Cf. Rorty and Ragg, “Worlds or Words Apart?,” p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> I put together this issue of *Pragmatism Today* during my stay as an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation research fellow at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin in 2011. I am grateful to the Institute for providing me with an excellent research environment and to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for its support. I would also like to thank Leszek Koczanowicz, Alex Kremer, Don Morse, Krzysztof Skarbek, Emil Višňovský, and David Wall. Finally, my sincerest thanks go to the Contributors.

## NOT WITH SYLLABLES BUT MEN:

### EMERSON'S POETICS OF THE WHOLE

John Lysaker

Emory University

*for Garrett Hongo and Terry Hummer,  
knowers and sayers*

"Art is the Urge."

Ralph Waldo Emerson,  
*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 1840

"Poetry is the *gai science*.  
The trait of the poet is that he builds, adds, and affirms."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination"

There are at least two Emersons, or rather, one, manifold Emerson and no less than two sets of Emersonians. One cluster, currently vigorous, valorizes Emerson's recoiling perspectivalism, his recurring insistence that phenomena like moods and temperament (or tropes, for that matter) foreshorten whatever clarity one might find in 'kingdoms of cause and effect,' in the "middle region," "amid surfaces," or even along the "subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life," to invoke the varied, eco-psychic geography of "Experience." Another bunch is drawn to the ecstatic sallies that depart these regions in an effort to map our condition, to "expand our orbit" as "Circles" would have it, to find the shores of our departures and ports for our bearing. But this group has been less vocal of late, which leads me to fear that we might be overly domesticating Emerson, trimming whatever shoots rise above the nominalist, often pragmatic contours of our critical present. I thus offer this essay as something of a counter-swing, a kind of reversal one might find in an essay like "Nominalist and Realist," one that says, in effect, 'yes, but not so fast.'

"Man lives by pulses," Emerson writes in "Experience."<sup>1</sup> I wish to explore a set of such pulses. They arrive courtesy of the muses and stand among the wildest phenomena in Emerson's corpus, namely, art and poetry, and it is precisely their abandon that renders them exemplary for one interested in recalling us to Emerson's boldest affirmations. Moreover, a kind of unbridled enthusiasm for the work of art spans Emerson's corpus. In his lectures, for example, several texts struggle to fathom art's power. Some concern particular artists and poets such as Milton, Michelangelo, Hafiz, and Shakespeare while others pursue more general themes like the nature of art and poetic figuration as well as their import for self-knowledge and self-culture. And these themes appear across his career, from early lectures on "Biography" (1835) and "English Literature" (1835-36) to later ones like "Poetry and English Poetry" (1854), the series "Life and Literature" (1861), and the very late pair, "Imagination" and "Poetry" (1872).

Questions concerning art and poetry also appear in most of the essay collections, e.g. "Art" (*Essays: First Series*), "The Poet" (*Essays: Second Series*), "Beauty" (*Conduct of Life*), "Art" (*Society and Solitude*), and "Poetry and the Imagination" (*Letters and Social Aims*). Equally significant is the organization of the first two collections. *Essays: First Series* closes with "Art" and *Essays: Second Series* commences with "The Poet." On the one hand, essays that begin these collections orient a whole that, by its very nature, eschews an axiomatic or even inferential structure in favor of leitmotifs and whatever pools and eddies their confluence generates. Opening overtures thus resonate throughout the volume, even if those ventures are transformed by what follows, as with "game," which appears in the poems that open "The Poet" and "Experience" and recurs in some central, late lines in "Nominalist and Realist," the rhetorical close of *Essays: Second Series*. On the other hand, essays that are given the final word or words accentuate leading lines of thought, thereby returning the reader to previous essays

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Poems* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1996), p. 482.

with an eye for their more salient concerns, even if the closing essay foregoes a summation, as with "Art," e.g. when it invokes an "aboriginal power," which recalls the "aboriginal Self" of "Self-Reliance."<sup>2</sup> Or consider the claim that art should "throw down the wall of circumstance on every side," which recalls complementary thoughts in "Circles," e.g. the "only sin is limitation."<sup>3</sup> It is thus noteworthy that two of Emerson's most significant collections give pride of place to two essays focused upon the power of art and poetry.<sup>4</sup>

In Emerson's writings on art and poetry, poetry is the favored child, though in a qualified sense, as we will see. Besides being a poet in his own right, Emerson also edited *Parnassus* in 1875, a collection of poems that he copied out over the years from the likes of Herrick, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare, as well as the occasional woman poet, for example, Julia Ward Howe, Lady Anne Lindsay, and a Mrs. Barbauld.<sup>5</sup> Also, *Representative Men* gives us essays on Shakespeare ("or, the Poet") and Goethe ("or, the Writer"), but none on sculptors or painters, though he praises sculpture in the late lecture, "Art," which he delivered several times between 1861 and 1869. And yet, in order to offer this praise, he quotes, in full, a nine-stanza poem by the English poet, John Sterling, and closes the lecture with that poem,

thus giving the final word to poetry.<sup>6</sup> But most importantly, none of Emerson's remarks on painting or sculpture rise to the rhapsody of "The Poet," where we read that a poet is the "principal event in chronology" and the "true and only doctor," that poetry is "true science," and that poets are "liberating gods." For Emerson, then, poetry, though not exclusively, best exemplifies the transformative power of art.

Because Emerson finds poetic language so remarkable, I want to come to terms with his assertions on its behalf, to determine why, on his view, poetry is healing and liberatory, and to determine how it manages such remarkable feats. To that end, I will focus on the "The Poet" from *Essays: Second Series*. Presuming that "Poetry and Imagination" (1875) was in part assembled by his daughter, Ellen, and his literary executor, James Elliot Cabot, "The Poet" marks Emerson's most sustained treatment. Moreover, Emerson's feel for poetic figuration does not dramatically change over the course of his career.<sup>7</sup> But "The Poet" has its limits. Notably, it offers few concrete analyses of how poetic language achieves (or approximates) its end. Other texts must come into play, therefore, including various poems (or parts of poems), though not necessarily Emerson's own.

"Poetry," Emerson writes in a lecture of 1841, "finds its origin in that *need of expression* which is a primary impulse of nature."<sup>8</sup> "The Poet" from 1844, elaborates:

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 434, 268.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 437, 406.

<sup>4</sup> Note also that the last collection, *Letters and Social Aims*, opens with "Poetry and the Imagination," though I hesitate to make too much of that volume given how much of its shape is due to hands other than Emerson's. For a detailed account of the book's editorial history, see Ronald Bosco's massive historical introduction to Volume VIII in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> A review of *Parnassus* indicates Emerson's conception of gender. The text is arranged thematically. Under "Human Life," one finds the sub-topics "Home, Woman, Love, Friendship, Manners, Holy Days, Holidays." Under "Contemplative – Moral – Religious," one finds the sub-topics "Man, Virtue, Honor, Time, Fate, Sleep, Dreams, Life, Death, Immortality, Hymns and Odes." This suggests that Emerson understands men and women to have distinct temperaments or ways of inhabiting the cosmos, and that each is fitted for different subject matters. But that is an issue for another time.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume II: 1855-1871* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 224-225.

<sup>7</sup> Both "The Poet" (1844) and "Poetry and Imagination" (1854), for example, present poetry as the true science, and precisely because it finds unity beneath change, wholeness across nature's diverse forms and trajectories. (Notably, "Poetry and Imagination" concurs.) In order to further defend the claim that Emerson maintains a consistent (which is not to say identical) conception of poetry throughout his career, throughout I will illustrate agreements between texts of different periods, although I will not call particular attention to this agreement, if only because there are more interesting matters to discuss.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume III: 1838-1842* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 348-349.



For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.<sup>9</sup>

I begin with these remarks because a perceived need lies at the heart of Emerson's high esteem for poets. Humans, he believes, must manifest their character, express it in a wealth of performances, a wealth equal to the richness of that character, or they suffer – "That man is serene who does not feel himself pinched and wronged by his condition but whose condition in general and in particular allows the utterance of his mind; and that man who cannot utter himself goes moaning all the day."<sup>10</sup> Where Adam Smith sees an innate need to truck, barter, and exchange, Emerson sees a broader trajectory: a need to find one's character written into the world that one inhabits.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, this broader trajectory is at once intellectual and practical. It begins in actions: gardening, clothing, what we buy and where, and so forth. But it culminates in a recognition of the truth of those actions, that is, the expression we seek must successfully reflect us back to ourselves, and for that, we need words. In his concept of expression, therefore, Emerson weds a sense of human restlessness, what Nietzsche later presents as pro-active desires, with the desire to understand that Aristotle finds integral to being human. And it is within that braid of lack and burgeoning surplus that the need for poetry germinates.

Unfortunately, most fail to find adequate expression. "We but half express ourselves," says "Self-Reliance," "and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us

represents."<sup>12</sup> The problem is not merely one of cowardice, however. As the essay "The Poet" explains: "but the great majority of men seem to be minors, who have not come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot *report the conversation they have had with nature*."<sup>13</sup> This remark is interesting in at least two ways (or three, since it offers a poetic redirection of Kant's claim that pre-enlightenment culture and character has not yet reached maturity or *Mündigkeit*). First, it suggests that many of us, even courageous ones, lack the ability to express all that we are. Second, we now have a better sense of what "expression" (and what a human life) entails: a manifestation of our character as it arises within an ongoing conversation with nature. What is to be expressed is not some internal state of affairs but the truth of our character as it appears to us, as it is disclosed in what the essay "Experience" terms "the world I converse with in the city and in the farms."<sup>14</sup> To be precise, Emerson denies neither interiority, i.e. manifold self-relations like feeling inspired or self-trust, nor its influence. Rather, his claim is that interiority bears the impress of manifold worldly relations such that the truth of our condition is the whole in which the genuine character of all our relations appears. In this at least, Emerson is thoroughly Hegelian: "The true is the whole."<sup>15</sup>

Let me underscore that the issue before us is one of genuine relation. The whole that is the true is not an undifferentiated unity, some perpetually congealing globe of divine essence. Instead, it involves multiple interactions and the differences (and the differentiation) those interactions presume. Moreover, for Emerson, as

<sup>9</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 448.

<sup>10</sup> Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume III*, p. 349.

<sup>11</sup> This need and Emerson's proposals for addressing it are the principal concern of my *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). For Smith's observation, see *Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 260.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448 – emphases added.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 491.

<sup>15</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 11. Emerson's sources for metaphysical holism are no doubt manifold (as are Hegel's), drawing from neo-Platonic thought and Vedanta. I note this to underscore Buell's important insistence that Emerson's thought springs from and wishes to return to world culture and neither from nor towards a purely domestic let alone exceptionalist discussion. Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

for Hegel, our thicket of relations relentlessly becomes, as does all of nature.

That rushing stream will not stop to be observed. We can never surprise nature in a corner; never find the end of a thread; never tell where to set the first stone. ... If anything could stand still, it would be crushed and dissipated by the torrent it resisted, and if it were a mind, would be crazed; as insane persons are those who hold fast to one thought, and do not flow with the course of nature.<sup>16</sup>

Bringing this thought from "The Method of Nature" into the task of self-expression, we could say, therefore, that our expressions must keep pace with our perpetual expression, for each marks an expression whose truth must be found.

All is progress, and ascension, and metamorphosis. Chyle becomes blood, bone, tooth, nail, hair, skin, according to exigency, and, so, over the animal, its soul runs out to the expression and incarnation of all its inmost self – as is the bird to the bird's nest. We have not seen the bird till we have seen its egg and its nest. The nest is part of the bird, so is of man the house, the temple, the garden, the laboratory, the school, the state house, the theater, the Academy of Music.<sup>17</sup>

This thought from the 1861 lecture "Art" suggests that each new manifestation potentially unveils a new side of our character. If we are to give voice to our existence, therefore, manifest and recognize it for what it is, we must learn to track ourselves wherever we go, even into that very tracking. And so, we who are cowards, or minors, or mutes (or all of the above), come to rely on poets. "For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume II: 1855-1871* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p. 221.

<sup>18</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 450. At least two senses of expression are now in play. One is appropriate to the way in which human character is expressed through action while the other binds appearance and reality to ongoing events of nature, e.g. in the neo-Platonic thought of emanation. And yet, because Emerson regards our need to express ourselves as yet another manifestation of nature (one that is thereby

But how does poetry pursue this task? "The Poet" replies: "the poet ... re-attaches things to nature and the Whole..."<sup>19</sup> What we lack and what the poet offers is a sense for the whole drama to which we belong.

Every man should be so much an artist, that he could report in conversation what had befallen him. Yet, in our experience, the rays and appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, *traverses the whole scale of experience*, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart.<sup>20</sup>

We know parts and many of us can analyze them, naming the qualities of things, some primary, most less so, tracing consequents back to their antecedents in discrete ecologies of cause and effect, but most cannot bring together work and play, body and mind, human and animal, life and death, the terrestrial with the celestial. That requires what "Circles" names a "bolder generalization" that takes up diverse accounts and finds in their pools and eddies broader phenomena.<sup>21</sup>

Let's consider some examples. The first comes from Heraclitus, whom Emerson names and implicitly quotes in the first paragraph of "The Poet."

But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact: Orpheus, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato,

continuous with it), the distinction should not be substantialized.

<sup>19</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 455.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 448 – emphases added. In the Preface to *Parnassus*, Emerson writes: "The poet demands all gifts, and not one or two only. Like the electric rod, he must reach from a point nearer to the sky than all surrounding objects, down to earth, and into the wet soil, or neither is of use." Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Parnassus* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1874), p. viii.

<sup>21</sup> Note that with regard to such expansions, "Circles" also defers to literary works. "Literature is a point outside our hodiernal circle, through which a new one may be described. The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it." Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 408.

Plutarch, Dante, Swedenborg, and the masters of sculpture, picture, and poetry. For we are not pans and barrows, nor even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes, when we know least about it.<sup>22</sup>

Emerson follows Heraclitus and uses "fire" as a universal figure, one whose manifold meaning names a basic character of all things and sets us along a continuum with everything that comes to be and passes away, and insistently so – we are not pans or barrow or porters but "children of the fire, made of it."<sup>23</sup>

One way that poets re-attach things to the whole thus involves universal symbols that purport to name something essential in all things. This means, of course, that for Emerson, "poetry" names the figurative power of language not simply verse. Whenever symbol, allegory, metaphor, metonymy, or synecdoche operate, the gesture is poetic on Emerson's terms. (This is why Plato proves a poet: cave, chariot, divided line, the *demiurgos* slapping form onto matter.)

Note, however, the origin of such figuration: the selfsame conversation with nature that each tries to grasp. "Things admit of being used as symbols, because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part."<sup>24</sup> And:

We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workman, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them the power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts

eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object.<sup>25</sup>

These passages are remarkable in their reflexivity. If poetry re-attaches things to the whole, its own figurative power also must belong to that whole. Otherwise, its figurations are actually detachments and enclosures. Emerson rejects such discontinuities, however, insisting that the "poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree."<sup>26</sup> It is necessary, therefore, that successful figurations track their own figurative sallies, and in a manner that belongs as much to the whole as that which they poetically figure.

A second path lies with particulars through which broad nature appears. According to Emerson, "there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature; and the distinctions which we make in events, and in affairs, of low and high, honest and base, disappear when nature is used as a symbol."<sup>27</sup> Begin with a tree and soon you will find the history of soil, the history of planters and woodsman, the history of rain and thus of tides, hence the moon, and of global industry, and of course, one will find the sun both 93 million miles away and yet here in the heliotropic arc of a house plant. All that seemed distant and long gone proves near when some particular is seen as the meeting place of everything else.

One can witness such figuration in Robert Pinsky's "Shirt."<sup>28</sup> It begins concretely.

The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,  
The nearly invisible stitches along the collar  
(lines 1-2)

The effect of this concreteness is to open up the assemblage that each shirt is, which allows the stanza to effortlessly continue:

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 456.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 457.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 454.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Pinsky, *The Want Bone* (New York: Ecco Press, 1990), p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 447.

<sup>23</sup> In "Poetry and English Poetry," Emerson aligns figuration of this sort with metonymy, which he defines as "seeing the same sense in divers things." Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I: 1843-1854* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p. 303. Because this is a rather loose definition that focuses more on analogical sense than actual poetic operations, I am not employing the analysis here.

<sup>24</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 452.

...along the collar  
Turned in a sweatshop by Koreans or Malaysians.  
(lines 2-3)

And so we are off and running, finding in the shirt upon  
our backs a history of global labor, though our weavers  
may live closer to home.

George Herbert, your descendant is a Black  
Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma  
And she inspected my shirt. ...  
(lines 38-40)

The poem thus sets something seemingly self-contained,  
a shirt, into a larger economy of forces and events. And  
it sets itself therein as well, continuing:

...Its color and fit  
  
And feel and its clean smell have satisfied  
Both her and me. We have culled its cost and  
quality  
Down to the buttons of simulated bone.  
(lines 40-43)

This penultimate stanza is striking in its irony and implicit  
reflexivity. On first blush, the speaker appears as a  
consumer who shares the inspector's estimation of the  
shirt's quality. But on another level, the speaker, who  
has recalled sweatshops and the Triangle Factory fire of  
1911 in which 146 garment workers lost their lives,  
opens a dialogue with the inspector about the cost and  
quality of the shirt, "Down to the buttons of *simulated*  
bone." In other words, down to the buttons, this is an  
unconvincing performance, and neither thinks that what  
has passed through their hands is satisfactory. More  
importantly, in addressing Irma Herbert in the second  
person, the speaker sets the poem into a larger  
conversation with other points and persons in the  
network of global labor, thus re-attaching itself to the  
world to which it has returned our shirts – one in which,  
on the poem's own admission, the final word has not yet  
been uttered.

It is precisely because the poet unveils an enveloping  
world, one that so often eludes us, that he or she proves  
a liberating god.<sup>29</sup>

We are like persons who come out of a cave or  
cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of  
tropes, fables, oracles, and all poetic forms.  
Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really  
got a new sense, and found within their world,  
another world, or nest of worlds; for, the  
metamorphoses once seen, we divine that it  
does not stop.<sup>30</sup>

A good deal is at work in this passage. Let us begin with  
the notion of liberation, which runs in two directions. "In  
my daily work I incline to repeat my old steps, and do  
not believe in remedial force, in the power of change  
and reform," Emerson says in "Circles." "But some  
Petrarch or Ariosto ... breaks up my whole chain of  
habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities. He  
claps wings to the sides of all the solid old lumber of the  
world, and I am capable once more of choosing a  
straight path in theory and practice."<sup>31</sup> Again, the issue is  
intellectual and practical. A genuine poetic disclosure  
turns us around; it interrupts old habits as it opens new  
vistas.

As Pinsky's poem evinces, concretion is everything in  
these transformations. Images focus and convert us. But  
atop them, or rather, through them, the poet's  
achievement is also somewhat formal. Once we witness  
a particular – a shirt, a tree, some pale light – waxing  
cosmological, it should dawn on us that any particular  
could play that role, even our own lives. In "The System,"  
John Ashbery says this to haunting effect.<sup>32</sup>

The system was breaking down. The one who  
had wandered  
alone past so many happenings and events  
began to feel, backing

<sup>29</sup> I think the use of "god" is designed to both: (a) deify  
the poet, rendering him or her a "divine" who provides  
ongoing revelation, and (b) continue the process, begun  
in "The Divinity School Address," of rendering Jesus  
ontologically unexceptional.

<sup>30</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 461.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>32</sup> See John Ashbery, *Collected Poems, 1956-1987* (New  
York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2008).



up along the primal vein that led to his  
center, the beginning  
of a hiccup that would, if left to gather,  
explode the center to  
the extremities of life ...  
(lines 1-5)

If we work toward our center atop the thought that each part relates to each, each belongs to a whole, we will undo the distinction between near and far, high and low, that is, that system of demarcation, including inside and outside, will break down. All at once, the center will be everywhere. This is quintessential Emerson. Again: "there is no fact of nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature..."<sup>33</sup> But that is not all. In our continuity with nature, and in nature's relentless unfolding: "There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us."<sup>34</sup> But this is a hard thought, difficult to say without risking a circumference, or rather, difficult to hear since everything seems to say it. Ashbery is right therefore to figure this realization as an occasional feeling as does in the opening lines of *Flow Chart*.<sup>35</sup>

Still in the published city but not yet  
overtaken by a new form of despair, I ask  
the diagram: is it the foretaste of pain  
it might easily be? Or an emptiness  
so sudden it leaves the girders  
whanging in the absence of wind,  
the sky milk-blue and astringent? We know  
life is so busy,  
but a larger activity shrouds it, and this is  
something  
we can never feel, except occasionally, in  
small signs  
put up to warn us and as soon expunged, in  
part  
or wholly  
(lines 1-11).<sup>36</sup>

With Emerson in mind, particularly the line "... character evermore publishes itself," I want to take "the published city" in terms of a thoroughly symbolic nature, one that

includes sentences and sunsets, characters and characters, one worthy of the phrase "larger activity," though it remains (and will remain) to be said what kind of "action" this is.<sup>37</sup> Second, I would add that only within the "published city" does the whole appear, that is, each appearing requires some other that indicates the appearing, if obliquely. "Direct strokes she never gave us the power to make," Emerson observes in "Experience," continuing: "all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents."<sup>38</sup> And art works are no different. "Our arts are happy hits," we find in *Society and Solitude*.<sup>39</sup> But how could it be otherwise? How could a part indicate a self-differentiating, ecstatic whole to another part, except by way of suggestion, one whose reach, affectively effective, exceeds what either part could concretely synthesize?<sup>40</sup> The whole, this larger "activity" that binds speakers, addressees, and all that concerns them (and no doubt much that doesn't), rushes into us as a feeling, a presence without circumference, a presence felt just at that point where our symbols break open and suggest more than they could possibly mean, a point where we find ourselves "like a traveler, surprised by a mountain echo, whose trivial word returns to him in romantic thunders," to return again to *Society and Solitude*.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 318. Whether "activity" fruitfully accounts for the dynamics of synchronic and diachronic webs of relation is a matter I have addressed in *You Must Change Your Life*, principally through the poetry of Charles Simic, though also in terms of Ammons's *Garbage* and Stevens's "Reality is an August Activity of the Imagination." John Lysaker, *You Must Change your Life: Philosophy, Poetry, and the Birth of Sense* (State College: Penn State University Press, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 473.

<sup>39</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume VII: Society and Solitude* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> In *Emerson's Fall*, Barbara Packer also finds the inevitability of suggestion in Emerson's poet. See Barbara Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1982), p. 193. For her, this primarily is due to nature's ongoing ecstasies. I would add that part-whole problems thicken the issue, and further note that suggestiveness has affective dimensions.

<sup>41</sup> Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume VII*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 454.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 405.

<sup>35</sup> John Ashbery, *Flow Chart* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> In an early lecture on Michelangelo, Emerson claims that the whole cannot be understood, only felt. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I: 1833-1836* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 101.

In a more general way, feeling is integral to the full range of poetic liberations that Emerson imagines.<sup>42</sup> Introducing *Parnassus*, he says:

Whatever language the bard uses, the secret of tone is at the heart of the poem. Every great master is such by this power... The true inspiration always brings it. Perhaps it cannot be analyzed; but we all yield to it.<sup>43</sup>

Here we enter the murky field of voice, that characteristic tone with which a poem or occasionally a corpus addresses its subject matter and readership. Perhaps these lines from Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" will prove concrete.<sup>44</sup>

O my Body! I dare not desert the likes of you  
in other men and women, nor the like of the  
parts of you;  
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall  
with the likes of the Soul, (and that they are the  
soul;)  
I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall  
with my poems – and that they are poems;  
(lines 131-33)

This poem overflows with enthusiasm, e.g. in the great length of each line. Interestingly, Emerson himself says: "the length of lines in songs and poems is determined by the inhalation and exhalation of the lungs," which I take to image a certain capacity for expression and thus for life.<sup>45</sup> But not just by way of line length, at least not in the case of these lines from Whitman, which brim with affirmation in the exclamation and declaration that open each line recalled: "O my Body!" "I believe..." "I

believe..." And the repetition deepens the thematic point: the body is a fit subject for praise, even veneration, since the repeated "I believe" recalls a *Credo*.

For Emerson, the poem's mood creates a space wherein one can assume the possibilities it figures. In "Persian Poetry," he writes: "Every song in Hafiz affords new proof of the unimportance of your subject to success, provided only the treatment is cordial."<sup>46</sup> In this context, "cordial" has powerful overtones, though one might miss them if one only thinks of a sweet aperitif or chocolate. But a return to the 1828 edition of Webster's dictionary gives us two other applicable meanings: (1) hearty and sincere as well as (2) invigorating and reviving.<sup>47</sup> What Emerson finds in Hafiz is a tone or mood that both radiates sincerity and invigorates whoever receives it. And in invigorating the reader, such a tone re-attaches us to the whole at the level of affect and action, that is, it recalls us from dulled habit, possibly despair, and allows us to find and pursue possibility in the world at our door.<sup>48</sup>

If we focus on the invigorating tones of certain poets, I think we can see why Emerson terms the poet the "true and only doctor." She or he gives us back a kind of youth, renewed vigor. In "Culture," Emerson suggests: "Incapacity of melioration is the only mortal distemper."<sup>49</sup> Whitman's lines, in their verve and exultation, cure such distemper. With rhythm and sound and sense they instill a visceral confidence in a life that will not treat the body as the soul's poor relation. And even Pinsky's poem is never overcome by disclosures that remind us of the bleak entanglements we wear. In

<sup>42</sup> This is true on the side of the text and the reader, as Richard Deming notes. "At the very least, I would venture to say that affect, emotional valence, is one measure of response and investment." Richard Deming, *Listening on All Sides: Towards an Emersonian Ethics of Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 128. I suppose I would say that it is the principal measure, even for poets as presumably "intellectual" as Ashbery, at least in efforts like "The System" and *Flow Chart*.

<sup>43</sup> Emerson, *Parnassus*, p. x.

<sup>44</sup> See Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1982), pp. 250-258.

<sup>45</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume VIII*, p. 24.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>47</sup> In "Poetry and Imagination," Emerson laments: "And the fault of our popular poetry is that it is not sincere." Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> Emerson reports: "It is much to know that poetry has been written this very day, under this very roof, by your side. What! that wonderful spirit has not expired! these stony moments are still sparkling and animated! I had fancied that the oracles were all silent, and nature had spent her fires, and behold! all night, from every pore, these fine auroras have been streaming." Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 451.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 845.

fact, at the level of tone, and in the poise of its lines and images, there is a confidence that these stories can be told, and that conversations with the likes of Irma Herbert can be pursued, and that poems will help us pursue them.

In several ways, then, poets re-attach us to the whole, thus empowering, Emerson believes, our own self-expression. Poetic figures help us see the world to which we belong (and the worlds within those worlds as well as what is, properly speaking, not a world but a "larger activity"), and in such a way that we inhabit that world with greater richness. In fact, on this view, the opening of such futures is the yet to be written verse of every truly great poem. As Emerson suggests: "He is the true Orpheus who writes his ode, not with syllables, but men."<sup>50</sup> The suggestion is not as strange as it sounds. Every poetic figuration is an action – it "adorns nature with a new thing" and "Words are also actions" – and every action a symbolic expression of the character of the actor and the ecology in which that action arose.<sup>51</sup> Emerson can thus, in a somewhat strict sense, regard the world as a poem in need of further elaboration, and he can regard each elaboration as the initiation of futures whose future poems we will be, as "principal events in chronology," to recall one of his more robust phrases. Turning to Emerson's figurations, then, the world is less a stage than a poem in the process of perpetual revision or turning, as in the turns of a trope, from *tropos*, meaning manner and style, or even way of becoming, given the root verb *trepein*, to turn. "Nature itself is a vast trope," Emerson writes in "Poetry and Imagination," continuing: "and all particular natures are tropes."<sup>52</sup> I am

happy to confess, then, that I find something startlingly plausible in Whitman's wild suggestion that the likes of bodies should stand and fall with his poems and that they are poems.

I have been working my way into some of Emerson's strongest claims on behalf of poetry, e.g. that the poet is a liberating god, the true doctor, and the inception of a chronology. I have also tried to show how and why Emerson thinks of nature and our role therein as an ongoing poem of visions and revisions that a moment might replace. But I have yet to pursue the thought that poetry is in some way a "true science." Admittedly, the claim is somewhat odd, as is the later assertion that the "Poet is a better logician than the analyzer."<sup>53</sup> I think we can track these thoughts, however. Moreover, doing so should lead us into a variety of critical contexts that will help us evaluate the position I have been elaborating.

Emerson's decision to present poetry as a kind of knowledge stems in part from a struggle with Plato that appears at various points within "The Poet," most often through rhetorical revisions. According to Emerson, the poet, contra arguments found in the *Republic*, possesses a higher kind of seeing that brings him or her closer to what is to be known, and it is on that basis that the poet leads us out of the fabled cave.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, that higher seeing does not result from the *elenchus* but from the kind of rhapsody that makes poets such a threat in the *Republic* and such silly geese in *Ion*. Moreover, in a revision of a core image from the *Phaedrus*, Emerson orients the soul away from a mind-governed chariot towards an instinct propelled steed. "The traveler who has lost his way, throws his reins on his horse's neck and trusts to the instinct of the animal to find his road, so must we do with the divine animal who carries us through this world."<sup>55</sup> At various points, then, Emerson, often by mere inversion, insists that Plato is wrong to

<sup>50</sup> Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume VIII, p. 37. This line from "Poetry and Imagination" has a partner in "Art" from *Essays: First Series*. "There is higher work for Art than the arts. ... Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end. A man should find in it an outlet for his whole energy. ... Art should exhilarate ... and its highest effect is to make new artists." Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 437.

<sup>51</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 450.

<sup>52</sup> Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume VIII, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Emerson, *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume I, p. 304.

<sup>54</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 456, 461.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460.

distrust inspiration and its persuasions, and wrong to claim that poetry only offers replicas of replicas.

And yet, a recurring thought underwrites these revisions. According to Emerson, the poet, *qua* sayer, surpasses the knower because the poet "uses forms according to life, and not according to the form," which leads Emerson to conclude: "This is true Science."<sup>56</sup> The key to this thought is Emerson's claim that the bird can only be known through the egg and the nest. The suggestion is that the character of any being lies in its expressions (including its relations), and that no single expression – no particular form, e.g. wing, beak, flying creature, egg layer, etc. – provides the whole story of any being that becomes. It inevitably omits dimensions and mistakes a partial for a complete development. And the problem only intensifies if we move to the whole, which is Emerson's principal concern in "The Poet." Not only is the whole manifest in every part, but also in unity through dynamic differentiation such that the whole is at once tern and warbler, minnow and pitcher plant, gravity, and RNA codon. And no form can capture this dynamic multiplicity, nor its movement, nor its differentiated continuity within and across that movement, nor its appearing to poets and dullards alike. As Emerson says, "because ecstasy is the law and cause of nature, therefore you cannot interpret it in too high and deep a sense," that is, again, there is no circumference, and forms, by definition, exact just that.<sup>57</sup> But the Emersonian poet does not rest with forms. Instead, she or he presents forms that, in their

evolving interanimation, suggest the life therein, and so his or her "speech flows with the flowing of nature."<sup>58</sup>

"This preference of the genius to the parts," writes Emerson, "is the secret of that deification of art, which is found in all superior minds."<sup>59</sup> No one expects to find the meaning of a poem in one word or in all its words taken as an aggregate. So too, Emerson thinks, no one should seek a form for the whole or assemble it one necessary and sufficient condition at a time. Or, in his words: "Natural objects, if individually described, and out of connection, are not yet known, since they are really parts of a symmetrical universe, like words of a sentence..."<sup>60</sup> So too with us, that is, we are parts of a whole and our lives are drawn there-from (and there-on). And so poetry, which can indicate that whole through figure and feeling, can claim a kind of knowing that trumps a knowledge assembled out of universals, no matter how broadly (or compositely) drawn.<sup>61</sup>

Emerson's feel for poetry's power is thus epistemologically ambitious, which makes him an interesting interlocutor for someone like Richard Rorty who also prefers the poet to Platonic metaphysics, particularly with regard to languages of self-expression, or, in Rorty's words, self-creation. But Rorty eschews any epistemic register at this point, setting practices of self-creation in direct contrast to practices of self-knowledge.<sup>62</sup> As we have seen, Emerson binds the two; deeper self-knowledge enables broader and richer self-creation. Now, on one level, Rorty could agree. Given a vocabulary, e.g. a neo-Platonic, expressivist metaphysics, certain forays might count as self-knowledge and one

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 456. "The Poet" actually addresses a triumvirate: the sayer, the knower, and the doer. In the first Shakespeare lecture of 1835, the trio includes the Imaginative, the Reflective, and the Practical. Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I*, p. 303. Interestingly, in the 1841 lecture, "The Poet," the poet is the "universal knower and singer." Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume III*, p. 357. Finally, the trio sayer, knower, doer also appears in an 1845 journal entry. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume IX: 1843-1847* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 338.

<sup>57</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 127.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 456.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 579.

<sup>60</sup> Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume VIII*, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Emerson's critique of Platonism is akin to his critique of sensuous science. "Science was false by being unpoetical. It assumed to explain a reptile or mollusk, and isolated it, – which is hunting for life in graveyards. Reptile or mollusk or man or angel only exist in system, in relation." Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume VIII*, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 27-8.



might revise a life on that basis, e.g. one might no longer eat animal flesh upon discovering that nature does not admit of fundamentally distinct natural kinds but is rather continuous. But vocabularies are invented not discovered and thus local gains in self-knowledge lose their epistemic sheen when their dependence on non-referential, hence non truth-functional vocabularies becomes apparent.

If we follow Emerson here, an interesting argument awaits. First, Emerson could agree that there are no finished or final vocabularies. As he says in "Circles," in a line partially cited above:

Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series. Every general law only a particular fact of some more general law presently to disclose itself. There is not outside, no inclosing-wall, no circumference to us.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, Emerson acknowledges the perspectival nature of every orientation. In "The Poet," he locates creativity in moods to which the poet resigns him or herself.<sup>64</sup> And then in "Nominalist and Realist," he exclaims: "If only we could have security against moods!" and be certain that today's inspiration would not be replaced by tomorrow's despair or, worse still, the "same immeasurable credulity will be demanded for new audacities."<sup>65</sup> But does it follow from our subjection to apparently inevitable and incalculable successions that we should abandon any epistemic sense with regard to phenomena like vocabularies?

I think Emerson believes that at least one epistemic dimension persists in events of poetic figuration; call it a concern for phenomenological fit. According to Emerson, poetry involves an "abandonment to the nature of things," which requires "suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him: then he is caught up into the life of the Universe..."<sup>66</sup> As the language of

"abandonment" and "suffering" indicate, phenomenological fit is not determined according to egological acts that compare concepts and sense data. Rather, mood and feel run the show, as when we say that something doesn't sit right with us. But let me be more concrete.

Rorty presents psychoanalysis as an instance of strong poetry fit for projects of self-creation.<sup>67</sup> He valorizes it because it grants everyone their own personal, epic drama, as opposed to Nietzsche, who reviews most lives like Peter Warlock purportedly reviewed the music of Vaughan Williams: "a little too much like a cow looking over a gate." But is a democratic air sufficient to recommend psychoanalysis as a language for self-creation? Rorty prefers this line of evaluation because it relies on terms like "useful" and "interesting" as opposed to "true" or "false." But doesn't a vocabulary have to make sense in a general way? Doesn't it have to sit right with us? Repression, displacement, and sublimation – these terms make a good deal of sense in our conversation with nature, whereas the thought of libidinal energy running like steam through pipes fares less well for many. But the issue is not whether Freud works *for you*. Rather, my point concerns how it *works or does not work*, and to that question, phenomenological fit seems relevant. Emerson thus seems justified when he claims: "The condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms, and accompanying that."<sup>68</sup>

I suppose Emerson would have another worry about Rorty's impatience with the language of self-knowledge within practices of self-expression. What are we to make of tropes like "vocabulary"? I ask because it seems to function like a circumference beyond which we cannot

<sup>63</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 405.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 586-587.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

<sup>67</sup> Rorty, *Contingency*, pp. 30-36.

<sup>68</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 459. This is not to suggest that phenomenological fit, any more than a feeling of certainty, will answer the skeptic or secure a path to things in themselves. But Emerson does not take those projects to have the last word on whether epistemic concerns should persist in our efforts to arrive at genuine self-expression.

reach, even though it invites all kinds of questions. For example, how are vocabularies acquired in the process of human development? One might reply, 'they are acquired as we learn a language,' but what learning processes are operative in that transition? The question is a forceful one because it indicates that in order for the form "vocabulary" to do the work it does, it arises in the course of a life already unfolding, that is, in order to account for its own emergence, the rhetoric of a "vocabulary" must reach beyond its limits. Similarly, one can ask: are vocabularies discrete? Clearly not, so how do they interact? How do Newtonian mechanics and psychoanalysis interact? Where do they meet? Again, the questions have force because they rush to the limit that "vocabulary" marks and push into questions of genesis, of emergence, transformation, and decay.

At points of genesis and transformation, Rorty begins to appear rather Kantian. I say this because the term "vocabulary" seems to frustrate lines of inquiry that the term itself awakens. Ask about the genesis of a vocabulary and one will meet with the claim that such questions only can arise and be pursued within a vocabulary. In other words, for Rorty, "vocabulary" functions as an a priori condition for the possibility of experience, inquiry, or poetry, and I think Emerson would resist the drift of "vocabulary" to the point of a quasi-Kantian limit. "There is not outside, no inclosing-wall, no circumference to us," he insists, and rightfully so. Not only do vocabularies have origins and porous limits, thus indicating a site where they emerge and interact, but the very term has its own porous lineage as well, e.g. in Dewey's "pattern of inquiry," Quine's "web of inquiry," and Kuhn's "paradigms," as well in the various situations to which each term is a response. It thus strikes me that "vocabulary" itself gives the lie to the limit it would police. Or, to put the matter in Emersonian terms, whenever "vocabulary" marks a limit that cannot be surpassed its advocates use life according to a form when they should be using forms according to life.

Given Rorty's pragmatism, I realize the irony of my charge. But Rorty's focus on the "useful" and "interesting" takes its leave from certain commitments that do not seem open to revision, and the rhetoric of "vocabulary" is one. Another, one Emerson would also resist, involves the pragmatic strategist who picks and chooses among vocabularies according to his or her purposes, e.g. psychoanalysis for private lives, liberalism for public ones. According to Emerson, it is unthinkable that we could choose our basic orientations in the cosmos, and poetry makes this plain. "In our way of talking," Emerson writes, "we say, 'That is yours, this is mine,' but the poet knows well that it is not his; that it is as strange and beautiful to him as to you..."<sup>69</sup> On Emerson's terms, our bearings take their leave from events that claim us prior to anything like choice. "He is the poet, and shall draw us with love and terror, who sees, through the flowing vest, the firm nature, and can declare it."<sup>70</sup> But we need not be swayed by Emerson's account – call it a phenomenology of conversion – in order to see a more general point. To the degree that the pragmatic reckoner is a rhetorical figure which functions as a practical substratum in Rorty's thought, it circumscribes our condition in a manner that, like "vocabulary," unconvincingly suppresses its own genesis and the waves of relations that circulate along, through, and beyond the hem of any circumference.

In this recollection of Emerson's feel for poetry, I have been defending Emerson's enthusiasms against possible objections from the likes of Plato and Richard Rorty. My hope is that such contrasts allow the power of Emerson's position to appear in starker relief. I think the same might result from another contrast, though this one involves one of Emerson's strongest readers, Stanley Cavell. In particular, I want to use Emerson's career-long affirmation of poetry to resist Cavell's efforts to set Emerson along a continuum shared by Wittgenstein's pronouncement in section 116 of *Philosophical Investigations*, namely that: "What we do is lead/bring

<sup>69</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 466.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 465.

[führen] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."<sup>71</sup>

Cavell connects Emerson's thought to section 116 of *Philosophical Investigations* in several places.<sup>72</sup> I find the richest connection in the "Introduction" to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.

Wittgenstein's return of words to their everyday use may be said to return words to the *actual life of language* in a life momentarily freed of illusion; Emerson's return of words may be said to return them to the *life of language*, to language and life transfigured, as an eventual everyday.<sup>73</sup>

What strikes me as odd is the perceived analogy between (1) a return to the "actual life of language," what Wittgenstein names their *Heim*, their home, which he casts in terms of the everyday, the *alltäglich*, and (2) a return to the "life of language," what in Emerson's terms can only be the whole, and thus a good deal more than language, as we have seen, though one should also note that for Emerson, the poet "has no definitions, but he is commanded by nature, by the living power which he feels to be there present."<sup>74</sup> But even setting aside Cavell's presumption regarding life and language, I don't see how the "life of language" on Emerson's terms can be thought in terms of the everyday uses that

Wittgenstein presents as the home of philosophical terms like knowledge, being, object, I, sentence, name, etc. I say this because Emerson repeatedly presents the poet as abandoning conventional usages. "His mastery of his native tongue was more than to use as well as any before," Emerson says of Milton; "he cast it into new forms. He uttered in it things unheard before."<sup>75</sup> And all to the good since everyday usage often fails to keep pace with souls that become – "the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet."<sup>76</sup>

Now, one might recall me to Emerson fondness for the low and the common, to use the language of "The American Scholar," or to his observation in "The Poet" that the "meaner the type by which a spiritual law is expressed, the more pungent it is, and the more lasting in the memories of men."<sup>77</sup> Fair enough, but these mean types are not left in the hands of everyday usage, hence Emerson's insistence that the person of "poetic temperament ... delights in this victory of genius over custom."<sup>78</sup> In short, I think poetry names an event that transgresses the dictates of everyday usage in a manner that is difficult to square with Wittgenstein's language of "everyday" and "home." And one sees this in Pinsky's poem "Shirt." The poem transforms our sense of "shirt," turning the word and the clothes we wear into allegories of global labor, alienated labor, and the history of exploitation that haunts the garment industry. But it does not do so by returning the word to any everyday meaning. Now, to be fair, achievements like Pinsky's may underwrite an "eventual everyday," which is to say, they may transform us (to recall Cavell's gloss of Emerson), but again, the how of this transformation seems to have little in common with the labor of returning philosophically twisted words to their home in ordinary language.

<sup>71</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001). To be clear, my resistance is not to the whole of Cavell's reading; far from it, as my *Emerson and Self-Culture* makes clear. Cavell's feel for Emerson's non-conformist, revisionary writings, like Poirier's feel for Emerson's punning, is exemplary.

<sup>72</sup> I know of five: Postscript A to "Being Odd, Getting Even," in: *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 130-136; "Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson's 'Experience'," in: *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), pp. 77-118; the "Introduction" to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 1-32; "Aversive Thinking" from the same volume (pp. 33-63); and "Emerson's Constitutional Amending," in: *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), pp. 192-214.

<sup>73</sup> Cavell, "Introduction," p. 21 – emphases added.

<sup>74</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 454.

<sup>75</sup> Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I*, p. 153.

<sup>76</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, p. 450.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 545.

<sup>78</sup> Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I*, p. 346.

Emerson's "The Poet" is a rich and remarkable essay and his occasionally wild affirmation of poetic figuration is provocative and instructive to those willing to track its celebrations and aversions. Of late, the theme and the essay have been eclipsed by essays like "Experience," which square more easily, at least initially, with a generation willing to live with the masters of suspicion and their fiercest heirs. Buell does devote an entire chapter of *Emerson* to "poetics," but his discussion strongly favors the self-interrupting style that characterizes "Experience,"<sup>79</sup> as does Richard Deming's *Listening on all Sides*, which claims that Emerson's poetics "enact a constitutive skepticism."<sup>80</sup> I hope I have managed to provide a broader expanse for the more affirmative dimensions of Emerson's thought, one in which they can soar more freely.

In another context, or in a larger one, it would be nice to bring "The Poet" into dialogue with "Experience," first by showing how the affirmations of "The Poet" occur in the fifth section of "Experience" (though I more or less do this in the fifth chapter of *Emerson and Self-Culture*), and then by arguing that "The Poet" only offers what "Experience" relentlessly works to embrace – that we "thrive by casualties," that the life of a fragment essayed from a fragment of self-knowledge is still a life of possibilities well worth essaying. But that is not the context of this essay and thus I'll let Emerson have the final word in a passage that, flush with the cordiality of Hafiz, offers a voice re-attached to the whole.

An air of sterility, of incompetence to their proper aims, belongs to many who have both experience and wisdom. But a large utterance, a river that makes its own shores, quick perception and corresponding expression, a constitution to which every morrow is a new day, which is equal to the needs of life, at once tender and bold, with great arteries – this generosity of ebb and flow satisfies, and we should be willing to die when our time comes, having had our swing and gratification.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> See Buell, *Emerson*.

<sup>80</sup> Deming, *Listening*, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume VIII, pp. 131-132.



## RORTY, ROMANTICISM AND THE LITERARY ABSOLUTE

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### Introduction

Over the past twenty years or so, debates surrounding the relationship between romanticism and pragmatism have opened up two particularly interesting avenues of inquiry. First, literary critics and intellectual historians have explored the possibility that the romantic period itself fostered a kind of proto-pragmatism.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, philosophers and theorists have thoroughly – and not always sympathetically – scrutinized Richard Rorty's interest in, and use of romantic themes and ideas.<sup>2</sup> This essay is, in part, an attempt to draw these lines of research together. Rorty himself was careful to distinguish between two distinct romanticisms: a

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<sup>1</sup> See Russell B. Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Jerome Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Paul Hamilton, *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Tim Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See Kathleen Wheeler, *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Thomas Claviez, 'Pragmatism, Critical Theory, and the Search for Ecological Genealogies in American Culture,' in: *Pragmatism and Literary Studies*, vol. 15 of *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. Winfried Fluck (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), pp. 343-380. For less sympathetic commentary, see Nancy Fraser, 'Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy,' in: *Consequences of Theory*, eds. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 93-110; Joan C. Williams, 'Rorty, Radicalism, Romanticism: The Politics of the Gaze,' in: *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, ed. John Pettegrew (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), pp. 61-84; Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 56.

'German' tradition of metaphysical idealism and an 'English' tradition of literary nature-worship.<sup>3</sup>

Foregrounding the latter, in this essay I shall compare Rorty's 'privatised' romanticism to Habermas's notion of the romantic aesthetic as a mediator between reflective thought and everyday communication. What emerges from this is a view of aesthetic engagement as not only essential to the worldview of 'romantic' writers generally, but also as incorporating a form of pragmatism *avant la lettre*. Under the sign of the 'Literary Absolute,' aesthetic engagement engenders a performative kind of writing, which, for a writer such as Wordsworth, undermines the boundaries between private and public, literature and philosophy.

### Rorty on Romanticism

Broadly characterised, the sort of romanticism that Rorty prefers is the independent, muscular variety celebrated by his literary mentor, Harold Bloom.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his career, Rorty embraced a number of ideas and attitudes associated with Bloom's picture of the romantic poet as engaged in a dialectical struggle for articulacy and autonomy. Rorty's romantic watchwords, accordingly, are imagination, spontaneity, freedom, contingency, plurality, power, and creativity – ideas that he pits against notions such as reason, receptivity, truth, necessity, commensurability, knowledge, and harmony. Most important, perhaps, is the notion of truth as created rather than discovered, enabled by the romantic inversion of the values assigned by Kant to the determinative and the reflective judgement in the third

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Romanticism to Pragmatism: Notes for Introductory Lecture,' *Richard Rorty Born Digital Files*. <<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/158>> (accessed June 11 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Rorty, 'Letter to Michael Lind,' June 8, 1998. *Richard Rorty Born Digital Files, 1988-2003*. UCIspace, University of California at Irvine, <<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/90>> (accessed June 11 2010): 'As a fervent disciple of Harold Bloom, I think that something new and wonderful came into the world with the Romantics, and so I find your view that "literature ... is a matter of decorum, rituals, traditions, allusions" disturbingly Eliotic.'

*Critique*.<sup>5</sup> According to Rorty, by reconfiguring Kant's cognitive, determinative judgement as that which merely produces agreement, and reflective, lawless judgement as paradigm-shifting spontaneity, romanticism 'inaugurated an era in which we gradually came to appreciate the historical role of linguistic innovation.'<sup>6</sup>

In later work, Rorty connected this movement to a broader nineteenth-century shift away from foundationalist 'metaphysical comfort' and towards a future-directed sense of 'historical hope,' in which poets follow Percy Shelley's call to become the legislators of social progress.<sup>7</sup> Shelley's writing encapsulates the secular utopianism that Rorty finds the most valuable element in the romantic elevation of poetical awe and sublimity over philosophical harmony and beauty. In this way, romantic enthusiasm becomes the opponent of Enlightenment and postmodern knowingness. It also partakes of Hegel's temporalisation of truth. On Rorty's reading, Shelley recommends that we poetically forget about the relation between eternity and time, between unconditioned truth and contingency, and instead 'concentrate on the relation between the human present and the human future.'<sup>8</sup> Among the important corollaries of this exchange, Rorty believes, are the idea of 'freedom as the recognition of contingency' and what he calls 'romantic polytheism,' the romantics' Hellenistic rejection of the Hebraic-Enlightenment notion of a universal standard against which all human values should be measured.<sup>9</sup>

Romantic idealism, however, troubles Rorty. What is useful about the romantic claim that truth is made rather than found, he cautions, is the idea 'that *languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences.'<sup>10</sup> Thus, while he claims that both romanticism and pragmatism are the rebellious offspring of the Enlightenment, united as 'reactions against the idea that there is something non-human out there with which human beings need to get in touch,' Rorty objects to Coleridge's replacement of analytic reason with the numinous imagination as the 'decoder' of truth.<sup>11</sup> Kant's Copernican revolution, 'the idea that we receive but what we give,' means not, as Coleridge suggests, that we are God-like creators of ideal Truth, but that we should dispense with the idea of 'Truth' as something to which our beliefs must correspond.<sup>12</sup> Rorty advocates jettisoning the 'philosophical bad faith' of transcendental argument, or argument by way of necessary presuppositions, in favour of a narrative of human change according to which forms of normativity evolve through contingent and linguistic processes.<sup>13</sup> However, '[t]his road couldn't be taken until Darwin and later thought helped us get rid of the idea of "Mind" and substituted "Language" – substituted Words for Ideas.'<sup>14</sup> Pragmatism really sets out from Darwinian naturalism, from a picture of human beings as evolutionary accidents.

Rorty has a further agenda here. By embracing naturalism, he hopes to distinguish his own work from postmodern appropriations of romantic ideas, many of

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Rorty, 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,' in: *Consequences of Pragmatism. Essays: 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 142-143.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and Postmodernism,' in: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin Books, 1999), p. 263.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Emancipating our Culture,' in: *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty and Kolakowski*, ed. Jozef Niznik and John T. Sanders (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> See Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 26, and idem, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,' in: *Philosophy as Cultural*

*Politics: Philosophical Papers Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Rorty, *Contingency*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism and Romanticism,' in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> Rorty, 'Romanticism to Pragmatism.'

<sup>13</sup> See Richard Rorty, 'Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?' in: *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Here, Rorty refers to transcendental argument as a Kantian 'gimmick' that encourages the thinker to take 'so many leaps into the darkness which surrounds the totality of everything previously illuminated' (p. 123).

<sup>14</sup> Rorty, 'Romanticism to Pragmatism.'

which he sees, like Habermas, as perpetuating romantic idealism by transcendently hypostatizing others of reason.<sup>15</sup> Thinking seriously about the self as constituted by intersubjectivity demands that we abandon the notion of an 'outside' of thought, an *unthought*. From this perspective, Derrida's 'trace' and other attempts to think the unthinkable are simply rehashing romantic sublimity, functioning as 'the name of the Ineffable, of what can be shown but not said, believed but not known, presupposed but not mentioned, that in which we move and have our being.'<sup>16</sup> Romantic 'sublimity' and 'depth,' taken in this way, make Rorty suspicious. He sees himself as arguing on behalf of reform rather than revolution, for the beauty of intersubjectivity rather than the sublimity of incommensurable phrase-regimes. Following Davidson, he maintains that '[f]rom a Darwinian point of view, there is simply no way to give sense to the idea of our minds or our language as systematically out of phase with what lies beyond our skins.'<sup>17</sup>

All of this leads Rorty to distinguish between two romanticisms: one dangerous (or, at best, useless), and one useful. The first is metaphysical, hypostatizing and 'deep,' using imagination as a stand-in for reason in the creation of ideal Truth; the second is playful, metaphoric and utopian, celebrating imaginative power as the

natural engine of linguistic innovation. Maintaining this distinction means emphasising the possibilities of redescription implicit in 'the romantic notion of man as self-creative,' and downgrading the equally romantic but less laudable aspiration that the vocabulary for that redescription be final, grounded in the noncontingent foundations of a 'transcendental constitution.'<sup>18</sup> Outmanoeuvring romantic idealism, in short, means embracing 'romantic utilitarianism.'<sup>19</sup>

In turn, Rorty's ironic, 'romantic utilitarianism' involves the separation of private and public spheres. It involves dropping 'the assumption, shared by Plato and Foucault, that there is a deep philosophical connection between private intellect and public behaviour.'<sup>20</sup> The idea that one must lead a pure and unified life, Rorty maintains, is an unwelcome hangover from Christianity, 'the quest for purity of heart – the attempt to will one thing – gone rancid.'<sup>21</sup> Rorty accordingly celebrates romanticism, elitism, innovation, and sublimity in private and defends liberalism, democracy, reform, hope and beauty in public. But he denies that there is any connection between these attitudes. Indeed, he claims, public romanticism is rarely a good thing, since it is 'when a Romantic intellectual begins to want his private self to serve as a model for other human beings that his politics

<sup>15</sup> See Richard Rorty, 'Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude,' in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*: 'Berlin, like Dewey, recognized that the Platonist hope of speaking with an authority that is not merely that of a certain time and place had survived within the bosom of romanticism, and engendered what Habermas calls "others of reason."' The most important of these, Rorty claims, is the infinite, figured by terms such as 'depth' and 'profundity': 'Depth does not produce agreement, but for romantics it trumps agreement' (pp. 83-84).

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida,' in: *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 102. See also idem, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,' in: *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996): Because of his perceived transcendentalism, Rorty describes Derrida as 'a sentimental, hopeful, romantically idealistic writer' (p. 13).

<sup>17</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Liberalism,' in: *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 358.

<sup>19</sup> Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,' p. 27. In his 'Notes on Impressions of Kloppenberg,' Rorty writes: "'Pragmatism as Romantic Utilitarianism" means something like: (a) the utilitarians were right that nothing matters except human needs and human suffering (b) we have to expand our conception of what counts as a human need ... so as to make sure that past practices don't get in the way of a Romantic future (c) there is a utopian goal of Human Freedom to be attained at the End of History, but what that utopia will look like cannot be formulated in advance ... It will be attained experimentally, and will always recede before us.' (*Richard Rorty Born Digital Files*, <<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/766>> (accessed June 11, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault,' in: *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,' in: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 13.

tend to become antiliberal.<sup>22</sup> Instead, he maintains, private aesthetic self-creation and public justice should be treated as two different kinds of tools, 'as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars.'<sup>23</sup>

### Rorty and Habermas

Rorty's private/public distinction has proved controversial, with some arguing that it is at best unnecessary, and at worst out of step with his broader advocacy of playfulness and irony.<sup>24</sup> Rorty himself admitted to never quite having 'found a satisfactory way of reconciling my admiration for the romantic intellectual with the habits of a democratic society,' conceding that *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 'doesn't do justice to the interplay between public and private.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Rorty, 'Moral Identity and Private Autonomy,' p. 194.

<sup>23</sup> Rorty, *Contingency*, p. xiv.

<sup>24</sup> See especially Nancy Fraser, 'Solidarity or Singularity?' Fraser claims that the struggle between 'a Romantic impulse and a pragmatic impulse' (p. 94) – i.e. between a liberal pragmatism and the romantic 'impulse that thrills to the sublimity of metaphor,' is never satisfactorily resolved in Rorty's work (p. 96). Kathleen Wheeler accuses Rorty in *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction* of having 'gotten stuck' in a dualism between individual and community that his mentor Dewey managed to avoid (p. 280, n.9). Wheeler follows Derrida, who rejects Rorty's application of the public/private distinction to his own work (see Rorty, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,' pp. 78–80). See also Sterling Lynch, 'Romantic Longings, Moral Ideals, and Democratic Priorities: On Richard Rorty's Use of the Distinction Between the Private and the Public,' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2007), pp. 97–120. Lynch argues that the private/public separation is unnecessary and inconsistent with the rest of Rorty's thought, since 'without the brute application of equal, competing, and *a priori* claims about moral priority, Rorty's moral problem will not arise' (p. 104). For a defence of the distinction, see Günter Leypoldt, 'Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty's Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making,' *New Literary History*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2008), pp. 145–163. Even Leypoldt, however, defends the distinction on the grounds that it is not a dichotomy. On the contrary, he claims, for Rorty, sublime 'literary world-making' and 'the sort of empathetic identification that encourages human solidarity' are 'noncompetitive goods that should not be ranked within a single hierarchy of literary or narrative functions ...' (p. 156).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Letter to Jacques Bouveresse, 3 Feb. 1992,' *Richard Rorty Born Digital Files*,

One way in which Rorty attempts to explore this 'interplay' is by introducing the idea that we should exchange the 'romance and idealistic hopes' of the pursuit of objective truth for 'a rhetoric that romanticizes the pursuit of intersubjective, unforced agreement among larger and larger groups of interlocutors.'<sup>26</sup> We should, he suggests, be romantic enthusiasts in promoting solidarity rather than idealists in obtaining objectivity. To the question: what is the normative basis of 'should' in this imperative? Rorty's reply is: we are. By generating our own forms of validity, we romantically create the norms by which we judge, and are judged.

There remains, however, an important difference between romanticising solidarity and hypostatizing the unconditioned. We make progress, Rorty maintains, 'by our lights ... But when we hypostatize the adjective "true" into "Truth" and ask about our relation to it, we have absolutely nothing to say.'<sup>27</sup> Instead, truth must be explained within a naturalistic framework. To be a 'naturalist' in Rorty's sense is not to privilege scientific or materialist accounts of causality; on the contrary, it simply involves refusing to 'divide things up into those which are what they are independent of context and those which are context-dependent.'<sup>28</sup> By accommodating pluralism in this way, '*holism takes the curse off naturalism*.'<sup>29</sup>

From the 1980s onwards, Rorty engaged in a series of debates with other pragmatist thinkers over the coherence and consequences of his own brand of

<<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/71>> (accessed June 11, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson Versus Crispin Wright,' in: *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Introduction' to *Truth and Progress*, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Inquiry as Recontextualization: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation,' in: *Objectivity*, p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

'holistic' naturalism.<sup>30</sup> Among his many interlocutors, Jürgen Habermas criticised the attempt to eliminate even the presupposition of context-independent truth from dialogue. Rorty's naturalism, Habermas argues, fails to distinguish between the reflexivity of philosophical discourse, which suspends the preconditions of everyday thought, and the dialogue of the 'lifeworld,' for which a concept of objective truth is a necessary precondition. Naturalist or deflationary theories of truth are fine for reflective thinking, Habermas maintains, but 'in everyday life we cannot survive with hypotheses alone, that is, in a persistently fallibilist way.'<sup>31</sup> Consequently, any pragmatic account of truth must accommodate 'the entwining of the two different pragmatic roles played by the Janus-faced concept of truth in action-contexts and in rational discourses respectively.'<sup>32</sup> It is possible to preserve a notion of the *absoluteness* of truth within a pragmatic account of the speech-act situation without falling prey to the perils of hypostatisation.

Rorty rejects this, countering that while it is possible to use idealisations in the same way that 'admirers of Plato have used ... hypostatizations—Beauty, Goodness, and Rightness ... the point of telling such stories is unclear.'<sup>33</sup> He is perplexed by Habermas's reluctance to embrace a playful romantic irony: 'Romanticism,' he notes, 'seems to make Habermas nervous.'<sup>34</sup> In Habermas's picture of truth as 'Janus-faced,' alternating between system and lifeworld, Rorty detects the vestiges of an essentially religious worldview, a yearning for an encounter with a nonhuman reality. Habermas, on the other hand, is puzzled by Rorty's refusal to acknowledge 'the *pragmatic dimension*' played by normativity in 'a particular deployment of the [truth] predicate.' This aversion to a strong notion of context-independent truth

is still more surprising, Habermas claims, when one realises that, in the notion of 'solidarity,' or extending the circle of dialogue and agreement, even Rorty smuggles a 'weak idealization into play.'<sup>35</sup> This in turn Habermas links to what he sees as a 'Platonist motivation' behind Rorty's outright rejection of any notion of unconditionality, a nostalgia for youthful idealism.<sup>36</sup> Even in Rorty's work, he suggests, hypostatisation is not without its uses.

### Romanticism and Pragmatism

Lurking behind the Rorty / Habermas debate on truth is a disagreement within neopragmatism over the legacy of romanticism. Rorty sets his romanticism at the level of 'least common denominator': creative, playful, future-oriented.<sup>37</sup> The aesthetic domain for Rorty is governed by 'play' only because it is securely privatised. Consequently, he sees Habermas as both too romantic (i.e. too transcendental and 'deep') in his hypostatizing of truth and not sufficiently romantic (i.e. not ironic) in his resistance to the role of play in human discourse. Viewed another way, however, Habermas's romanticism can be seen as playful precisely *because* it embodies the predicament of being between private and public spheres, between a recognition of truth as a human fiction and truth as the precondition of communication. For Habermas, accordingly, Rorty is both too romantic (i.e. secretly nostalgic and homesick) in his rejection of

<sup>30</sup> See especially the exchanges in *Rorty and his Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn,' in: *Rorty and his Critics*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> Rorty, 'Introduction' to *Truth and Progress*, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy,' in: *Truth and Progress*, p. 311.

<sup>35</sup> Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn,' p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, "'...And to define America, her Athletic Democracy': The Philosopher and the Language Shaper; In Memory of Richard Rorty," *New Literary History*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2008), pp. 3-12. Habermas observes that '[t]here is a streak of nostalgia about claiming to offer a philosophy that cleans up with all extant philosophy ...' (p. 8). See also Michael Fischer, 'Redefining Philosophy as Literature: Richard Rorty's "Defence" of Literary Culture,' in: *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and Beyond*, ed. Alan Malachowski (London: Blackwell, 1990): Fischer argues that because 'Rorty's definition of literary discourse is fundamentally negative, generated by the philosophical tradition that he wants to subvert,' his own view of literature 'perpetuates what he sees as the Platonist's all-or-nothing outlook' (p. 241).

<sup>37</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Rationality and Cultural Difference,' in: *Truth and Progress*, p. 200.



idealism and not suitably romantic (i.e. not tolerant of equivocity) in his refusal to recognise the Janus-faced nature of the truth concept, which is both philosophically dubious *and* pragmatically indispensable.

Of the two thinkers, it is Rorty who makes the rehabilitation of romantic ideas a key component of neopragmatism. Any assessment of Rorty's romanticism, however, is beset by two problems. The first, perhaps surprisingly, is that he underestimates just how pragmatic the romantics already are. Until recently, it was still not uncommon to find critics broadly characterising the romantic revolt against the instrumental rationalism of the Enlightenment (Wordsworth's 'meddling intellect') as the idealisation of the 'other' of reason in the shape of the creative imagination. Romanticism, according to this picture, reacts against the reification of truth as object by producing, in turn, its own hypostatisation in the form of aesthetic plenitude. Accepting this narrative, Rorty remains concerned that insofar as they tried to say something 'about' truth, the romantics (particularly English, 'nature-worshipping' ones) were guilty of unnecessary and sometimes mischievous hypostatisation.

The main difficulty with this picture is that it disregards the relationship between the newly-forged concept of the aesthetic and the Enlightenment-romantic discourse of communicative reason. Habermas describes how early nineteenth-century culture develops a language of decentred, communicative rationality that forms a 'counterdiscourse' to the reifying tendencies of both empiricism and idealism. As I have argued elsewhere, in Britain this counterdiscourse emerges from a number of sources within linguistic and anthropological currents in late eighteenth-century empiricism.<sup>38</sup> Foremost amongst these were Thomas Reid's hermeneutics of perception, John Horne Tooke's linguistic deflation of 'Truth' and Jeremy Bentham's understanding of the role played by

'logical fictions' in everyday communication. In developments such as these one finds a shift away from mentalism and representationalism and towards an interest in how beliefs are justified through norms embedded in the communicative practices of communities. This linguistic and proto-pragmatic turn is incorporated into the work of writers such as Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, where it re-emerges as the immanent critique of their own habits of idealism.<sup>39</sup> Rorty's conversational pragmatism is prefigured in romanticism, then, but not in the way that he supposes. As David Simpson has argued, Rorty's idea of truth as 'conversation' can be traced back to an eighteenth-century intellectual culture that elevated nonprofessionalism and politeness, ultimately feeding romantic conceptions of creativity, authorship, and the 'literary.'<sup>40</sup> The English romantics, in turn, *reconstruct* Enlightenment ideas of conversation, extending the public and dialogical mode of a writer like Pope *inwards*, so that the Lockean, punctual self *itself* becomes dialogical, exposed to the same 'conversations' that shape communities.

Unlike Rorty, however, Coleridge and Wordsworth maintain a concern with the role played by transcendental conditions embedded in the pragmatics of communication. This brings us to the second problem with Rorty's romanticism, which is that Rorty appears to strip romanticism of what makes it distinctive as an intellectual force in the first place: the idea of aesthetic *engagement* with the world and with other people. What is at stake in the romantic idea of the aesthetic is Kant's redescription of the thing-in-itself as a purely regulative category. The impossibility of reconciling the finite with the infinite, the conditioned with the unconditioned, produces romantic equivocity as truth becomes, in Habermas's terms, 'Janus-faced',

<sup>39</sup> This form of critique is what Paul Hamilton aptly terms 'metaromanticism.' See *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half-Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> See Tim Milnes, *The Truth about Romanticism*, chapter 2.

unknowable and yet always presupposed. Being in two minds about truth in this way drives the romantic interest in the aesthetic as mediator between everyday communicative practices and their transcendental conditions. This in turn means bringing private and public spheres, imagination and reason, literature and philosophy, into free play. For writers such as Schiller, Coleridge and Friedrich Schlegel, such free play does not occur outside the aesthetic; it is the aesthetic process itself. Romantic aesthetic mediation emerges as a form of self-critique rather than hypostasis, elevating, as Habermas puts it, the 'body-centred experiences of a decentred subjectivity that function as the placeholders for the other of reason.'<sup>41</sup>

Herein lies the romantic challenge to philosophy: to see itself as exhausted in artistic activity, what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy term the 'Literary Absolute.' By declaring that '[t]he actual infinite is the infinity of the work of art,' romanticism designates the work *in progress* as the 'infinite truth of the work' and invents the genre of 'Literature' as the interplay of spontaneity and reflection, poetry and philosophy.<sup>42</sup> Lying indeterminately between a thing and an act, the aesthetic process is always becoming, which is another way of saying that it is always performed.<sup>43</sup> This notion of performativity, essential to romantic writers as the basis of an aesthetic means of *overcoming* contradiction, is inimical to pragmatists committed to *dismissing* contradiction. Consequently, Rorty's private ironism bears little resemblance to that of Coleridge and

Schlegel, for whom the ironic or performative features of aesthetic objects testify to an ineffable encounter with the unconditioned.<sup>44</sup> And yet, when Rorty attempts to evade dangerous hypostatisations in his own work by privatising the imagination, he transforms the romantic idea of the aesthetic, the very point of which was to mediate *between* the finite and infinite, between everyday pragmatism and regulative idealism, beyond recognition. While Rorty alternates between his romantic and naturalistic sides, the romantics mediate: since the Absolute is fundamentally 'literary', to think *at all* is to aestheticise. Only by understanding how the romantic idea of the aesthetic relates to absoluteness can we understand why the romantics write in the way that they do, that is, performatively.

### Rorty and Wordsworth

At this point I should make it clear that none of this necessarily implies that Rorty's romantic utilitarianism is a *bad* idea, merely that it trades on a bad idea of romanticism. Nor is the point that Rorty's conception of romanticism is partial (that much he admits) but that in stripping the aesthetic imagination of its power to engage with a public world, Rorty stretches the idea of 'romanticism' beyond breaking point. In order to illustrate this, I would like finally and briefly to compare two 'romantic' autobiographical narratives. The first is Rorty's own. In his essay, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,' Rorty recounts how his upbringing by Trotskyite parents led him to view his non-political, 'private, weird, snobbish, incommunicable interests' with unease, particularly his enthusiasm for wild orchids. He recalls how the romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Yeats inspired him in the attempt to synthesise his sense of political duty with his botanical pursuits:

<sup>41</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 306.

<sup>42</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, 1978, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Esterhammer observes that for Coleridge, 'the verb "to be" functions "as a verb-substantive, thus as both an act and a state – and thus as a phenomenon that resembles *becoming* or even *performance*' (p. 8).

<sup>44</sup> See Adam Carter, "'Self-Creation and Self-Destruction": Irony, Ideology, and Politics in Richard Rorty and Friedrich Schlegel,' *Parallax*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1998), pp. 21-40. Carter maintains that by failing to heed Schlegel's account of irony as the 'dialectic of *self-creation* and *self-destruction*' (p. 23), Rorty's ironism 'is profoundly undialectical in its conceptualisation' (p. 34).

I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me – in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats – ‘hold reality and justice in a single vision’. By *reality* I meant, more or less, the Wordsworthian moments in which, in the woods around Flatbrookville (and especially in the presence of certain coralroot orchids, and of the smaller yellow lady slipper), I had felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance.<sup>45</sup>

The young Rorty was rescued from his dilemma by reading Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, whose historicism taught him (once he had been immunized against pantheism by Dewey) a ‘cheerful commitment to irreducible temporality’<sup>46</sup> and thus that ‘there is no need to weave one’s personal equivalent of Trotsky and one’s personal equivalent of my wild orchids together.’<sup>47</sup> The adult Rorty’s solution to the paradox of Trotsky and the wild orchids, then, was to privatise his romantic enthusiasms. This involves ‘accepting that what matters most to you may well be something that may never matter much to most people ... But that is no reason to be ashamed of, or downgrade, or try to slough off, your Wordsworthian moments.’<sup>48</sup>

Rorty’s use of the term ‘Wordsworthian moments’ is suggestive, particularly in light of the poet’s own association of flowers with epiphanic and renovating ‘spots of time’ recovered through the ‘inward eye’ of memory and imagination. Closer inspection, however, reveals that Wordsworth’s relationship with evocative flora bears little resemblance to Rorty’s. Take, for example, the memorable appearance of the pansy in ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, which confirms the poet’s deep sense of loss:

The Pansy at my feet  
Doth the same tale repeat:  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?  
(54-57)<sup>49</sup>

Wordsworth chooses his flower with care. Traditionally likened to the human face, the pansy, whose name derives from the French term *pensée*, has a long association in Western culture with thought and memory – key themes in Wordsworth’s narratives of loss and recovery. Thus, in the ‘Intimations’ ode, the pansy echoes the forms of nature that ‘speak of something that is gone’ (53). As Paul de Man claims, however, images of plant life in romantic poetry generally carry the heavy (for de Man, impossible) burden of symbolically binding being and truth, metaphor and meaning, in an organic unity.<sup>50</sup> The romantic plant promises to overcome contingency and temporality; hence the numinous power of those suspended ‘moments.’ In the particular case of the ‘Intimations’ Ode, the flower offers the narrator the prospect of recovering a ‘visionary’ unity by reminding him of what he has lost since childhood. At the same time, the face of the flower suggests an interlocutor, an equivalent centre of self, and thus the possibility of dialogue. Seen this way, Wordsworth’s pansy is a metaphor for metaphoricality, signifying the dependence of ‘face-to-face’ conversation upon an act of imaginative projection that is itself fundamentally poetic or figurative.

More (much more than I can detail here) could be said about the role played by the pansy at this pivotal point in the ‘Ode.’<sup>51</sup> The point I wish to make, however, is that, by imagining a dialogue with a corresponding form in nature, Wordsworth foregrounds the constitutive role of the aesthetic imagination in mediating one’s interaction with the world and with other people. From this

<sup>50</sup> See Paul de Man, ‘Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,’ in: *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For de Man, in promising a natural unity of language and world, the plant becomes one of the most overdetermined romantic images, one whose failure is self-inscribed, since ‘it is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, but of never achieving the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object’ (p. 6).

<sup>51</sup> The end of the fourth stanza marks the point at which Wordsworth laid down his pen in late March 1802. Thereafter he worked on the poem intermittently before completing it in June 1804. See Curtis’s notes on the composition of the ‘Ode’ (*Poems*, p. 271).

<sup>45</sup> Rorty, ‘Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,’ p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Text from William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 272.

perspective, aesthetic idealisations (such as visualising the possibility of communication through the image of a pansy) and public behaviour cannot be divided. For Wordsworth, the relationship between the personal and the social is aesthetic insofar as the normative forms that our thoughts presuppose are shaped by complex relationships between sense, memory, emotion, and pleasure. Rorty's flowers, by contrast, are Platonic and remote, detached from everyday life. Initially collector's items, the wild orchids come to function to the teenaged Rorty as symbols of 'moral and philosophical absolutes,' insofar as they are 'numinous, hard to find, known only to a chosen few.'<sup>52</sup> The pansy at Wordsworth's feet, however, is more than just a private curiosity. Always already humanised, the communicative face of the pansy figures the very aestheticisation of thought (the figuration of the Absolute) performed by the poem itself. It is this aestheticisation that, for Wordsworth, makes conversation and thought possible.

## Conclusion

I have argued here that, insofar as they replace the romantic idea of an aesthetic dialectic between self and world with one bracketed within the private sphere, Rorty's numinous 'moments' are far from 'Wordsworthian'. By privatising a notion of the aesthetic that is always *more* than merely private, Rorty throws the romantic baby out with the bathwater. In this respect, he is closer to a naturalist thinker like Hume than to a romantic poet like Wordsworth. Rorty might have accepted this claim (he described himself as a 'neo-Humean').<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that all this demonstrates is that, in coining the term 'romantic utilitarianism,' Rorty alighted on an unhelpful adjective,

a problem solved by simply replacing 'romantic' with a less loaded descriptor, such as 'creative' or 'linguistic.' There is an element of truth to this: again, I am claiming that Rorty's misprision of romanticism undermines not his neopragmatism, but merely his characterisation of the latter as *romantic* utilitarianism. That he chose to do so, especially when viewed in light of his wide-ranging writing on romanticism and pragmatism, tells us something interesting about his understanding of the relationship between the two.

In particular, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, it confirms that Rorty's image of romanticism is fundamentally Bloomian. Like Bloom in his early work, Rorty's interest in the romantics is based on notions of power. On this picture, the romantics are creative idealists committed to 'taking the world by the throat and insisting that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.'<sup>54</sup> And yet, while this formulation goes some way to explaining why Rorty preferred to keep romantic enthusiasms indoors, it offers a rather limited account of philosophical romanticism. Habermas's work, by contrast, enables us to question the Bloomian model of the romantic imagination as centred in a powerful ego. What Habermas offers is an account of romantic aesthetics as rooted in ideas of sociability and conversation. Rather than relying upon hypostatised negations of reason, writers like Wordsworth located the condition of possibility for communication in a shared notion of truth as the unconditioned, or Absolute.

Rorty, of course, rejects such transcendental narratives, citing Donald Davidson's argument that '*the very absoluteness of truth is a good reason for thinking "true" indefinable and for thinking that no theory of the nature of truth is possible.*'<sup>55</sup> Davidson, however, did not go quite so far as to dismiss all stories about truth as pointless. Just because truth is an 'indefinable concept,'

<sup>52</sup> Rorty, 'Trotzky and the Wild Orchids,' p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> See "'Relativism: Finding and Making" and transcription of conversation with Juergen Habermas and other scholars,' *Richard Rorty Born Digital Files* <<http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/handle/10575/1002>>: '... I think of imagination and sentiment ... as the faculties which do most to make moral progress possible. I don't want to be a neo-Aristotelian, I want to be a neo-Humean.' (68).

<sup>54</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Appendix: The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature,' in: *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> Rorty, 'Introduction' to *Truth and Progress*, p. 3.

he maintains, 'does not mean we can say nothing revealing about it: we can, by relating it to other concepts like belief, desire, cause and action. Nor does the indefinability of truth imply that the concept is mysterious, ambiguous, or untrustworthy.'<sup>56</sup> Even Rorty is compelled to say something 'about' truth when he links its 'absoluteness' to its indefinability; this is one point, at least, upon which he and Wordsworth are in agreement. It is Habermas's and Davidson's idea of truth as the condition of possibility for communication that best reflects the philosophical accent of much romantic poetry. Davidson's own recommended method 'is to attempt to trace the connections between the concept of truth and the human attitudes and acts that give it body.'<sup>57</sup> For Wordsworth, tracing the connections between 'human attitudes and acts' and a concept that is both pragmatically indispensable and theoretically indefinable demands a narrative technique that can overcome contradiction by mediating the natural and the Absolute. Insofar as it incorporates an awareness of the impossibility of this task, and thus its own figurality, this kind of romantic narrative is *aesthetic*.<sup>58</sup> By 'conversing' with (rather than privately idealising) pansies and daffodils, Wordsworth's narratives aesthetically perform what cannot be sentenced without contradiction: the idea that the truth predicate upon which communication depends is both fictional and unconditional, figurative *and* absolute. In their persistent, obstinate engagement with the literary-

absoluteness of truth, the romantics were more pragmatic than Rorty allowed.

<sup>56</sup> Donald Davidson, 'The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,' in: *Truth, Language, and History* (London: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>58</sup> See Charles Altieri, 'Practical Sense—Impractical Objects: Why Neo-Pragmatism Cannot Sustain an Aesthetics,' in: *Pragmatism and Literary Studies*, vol. XV of *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. Winfried Fluck (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), p. 116. Altieri argues that pragmatism like Rorty's emphasises propositional articulacy in literature at the expense of the kind of performative or non-sentenceable features that romanticism attributes to aesthetic objects. For a defence of Rorty's repudiation of the postmodern, 'romantic mythology' (p. 157) of otherness, see Isaac Nevo, 'Difference without the Flux: Pragmatic vs. Romantic Conceptions of Alterity', *Man and World*, vol. 25 (1992), pp. 149-64.



## RICHARD RORTY ON LITERATURE AND MORAL PROGRESS<sup>1</sup>

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### I

“...the imaginative experiencing of a work of literature frequently calls into being the moral imagination.”

“This expansion and deepening of the student’s moral awareness constitutes the education of moral imagination.”

James, E. Miller, Jr.  
“Literature and the Moral Imagination”

“Mathematics helps physics do its job; literature and the arts helps ethics do its.”

Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*

Having long been interested in the intersection of literature and morality, I have become increasingly intrigued upon hearing speakers at academic conferences make reference to Richard Rorty and his notion of moral progress through literature. Over the years I have witnessed many voices, in philosophy and elsewhere, skeptically deny that moral progress is ever, or can ever be, realized – anywhere, in any context – and certainly not through reading fiction. While one might counter by citing advances made over the last half century in areas such as human and civil rights or concern for the natural environment, what would any of this possibly have to do with literature? Consequently, I have begun to feel a need to get a clearer picture of just how Rorty conceives the relation between literature and morality, and, more specifically, what he means by moral progress plausibly achieved through reading novels in particular. Though Rorty occasionally refers to major philosophers as strong poets (a term borrowed from

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Christopher Voparil and Eduardo Mendieta for their wise counsel and helpful suggestions as this paper was taking shape.

Harold Bloom), he claims not to be a very good reader of poetry; hence, his preference for novels, that is, for longer narratives in which strong characters can be developed.<sup>2</sup>

There appears to be no single location where Rorty comprehensively lays out his broad conception of literature and morality. What we do have are snippets, morsels, developing ideas that emerge in various essays, sometimes returned to and elaborated further in other, later essays. This paper is simply an initial attempt to gather such ideas, notions, suggestions from a few limited, but essential, sources, put them together in a reasonably coherent fashion, and lay them down in hopes of painting at least an initial portrait of Rorty’s overall perspective or vision. Insofar as this is my first writing of any sort on Rorty, what follows is not intended to be a masterful, technical demonstration of philosophical or literary scholarship on Rorty. Rather it is a suggestive piece, in which there will be no rational arguments per se, or attempts to “prove” a point. In what I take to be a Rortyan spirit, this will rather be an essay that seeks to clarify and extend a philosopher’s views on an important and recurring topic in philosophy and literature. To that end, I reiterate that I am consciously adopting a limited focus. I do not deal directly with Rorty’s politics, his various challenges to the analytic tradition, his views on (T)truth and knowledge, his hopes for liberal democracy or for America, all terribly important subjects for Rorty studies generally. In addressing his ideas on morality and literature, these topics are, of course, unavoidably implicated in varying degrees, but I am content here in simply trying to answer the question of what Rorty means when he says we can achieve a measure of moral

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. an interview with Rorty conducted by Edward Ragg entitled “Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies,” in: *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews With Richard Rorty*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 369-396. Also, section two (on the novel) in Rorty, “Redemption From Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises” (full citation below).

progress by reading novels. His ideas on this matter are, I believe, generally in tune with traditional strains of American pragmatism, particularly leading ideas of John Dewey and William James, but I do not wish to make the question of Rorty's understandings of pragmatism, or neo-pragmatism, a focal point of this work. Such would be another, and different, paper; indeed, the sort of project that numerous students of Rorty, both supporters and critics, have already expertly directed their attention to.

As an initial generalization, it is fair to say that Rorty offers all of us (pragmatists, neo-pragmatists, aestheticians, literature people – inclusive of writers, critics, and theoreticians) a unique and challenging perspective, or better yet, something like a varied quilt of seemingly unconventional and provocative reflections on literature, philosophy and morality. His views are singular in our contemporary context, especially when contrasted with currently reigning “theories” of literature, its nature and how it works. Rorty's views do not constitute a formal theory, nor are they overtly dogmatic. He cannot, nor does he seek to, prove the validity of his ideas. In a pragmatic vein he is more interested in whether his notions work. Are they useful rather than true, and do they allow for more expansive, generous and sympathetic reading encounters with literary works? Do they show persuasively how some literature may assist in moral progress?

His preoccupation is with narratives – not theory about narrative – with the story and story-telling, not presumed arguments or principles engrained within or growing out of the story. Rorty, I suspect, would object to my use of the following words to describe his approach: his readings of texts strike me as, in a sense, “traditional” and “intuitive” in the way literature was perhaps read and understood in a pre-theory obsessed time, a period which assumes that some ideology or other (i.e. Marxism, psychoanalysis) or some philosophical development (i.e., semiotics, deconstruction) must be the key to unlocking the

mysteries and deeper meaning of narratives. If pressed I might even say his views reflect a practical, “common sense” (another phrase he likely would resist) approach to fiction, implying simply the way in which any reader quite naturally wonders about what the experience of reading a story, feeling and thinking about the story, does to her. Does it somehow change her, and, if so, in what ways? Instead of obsessing over whether the text can be fitted into, or most fruitfully interpreted by, a philosophical, psychological or political theory, Rorty would have us ask whether our readings of say American authors like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Philip Roth or John Steinbeck afford new insight into ourselves and others, perhaps strengthening and expanding our appreciation of and empathy for those in need? Does such reading help us better comprehend our human social reality? Does it provide a moment for the reader to get inside the skin of others, namely, the strong characters in a story, and, for a moment, experience the world from their perspectives?<sup>3</sup>

As stipulated, I will here make use of a limited number of Rorty essays I have found particularly helpful. Principle sources include “Ethics Without Principles,” “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens,” “Justice As a Larger Loyalty,” and the lesser known “Redemption From Egotism: James and Proust As Spiritual Exercises.” Other helpful references are *Consequences of Pragmatism*, especially the “Introduction” and chapter “Is There a Problem With Fictional Discourse?,” and “The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature,” an appendix to *Achieving Our Country*. As for literary illustrations, Rorty's essays on Nabokov and Orwell in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* are perhaps the most pointed and well developed. The secondary, scholarly work of Christopher Voparil and Eduardo Mendieta will, also, be of considerable assistance in this endeavor.

<sup>3</sup> I have pursued this “inside the skin of” line of interpretation in previous writings, perhaps most notably in “Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection,” included in *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck*, ed. Stephen K. George (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), pp. 61-71.

II

In attempting to articulate Rorty's views on the relation between literature and morality, it will be at first helpful to briefly draw a contrast with what he is definitely not saying. Theorists, ideologists of differing stripes, literary critics, advocates of religion and ethicists have all, over the ages, offered their own at times self-serving theories of literature, virtually all of them criticized or even rejected by Rorty.

In the essay, "Redemption From Egotism,"<sup>4</sup> Rorty clearly identifies several things that his sort of imaginative approach to literature is not about when it comes to morality. Fiction, for Rorty, ought not promote a religious conception of ethics or morality. It is not about advancing, for example, Christian or Jewish values or seeking, through reading, converts to such religious faiths. Literature does not peddle dogma any more than it lays out a system of religiously inspired moral do's and don'ts for its readers. In fact, Rorty believes that religion (as well as philosophy) must be overcome in narratives. Contrarily, he suggests that in order to attain what Harold Bloom refers to as greater reader autonomy – readers who are more sensitive, knowledgeable, perhaps wiser – "the replacement of religion and philosophy by literature is a change for the better."<sup>5</sup> And further, when speaking of the differences between religious and literary cultures, Rorty claims that "devotional reading emphasizes purification, rather than enlargement, getting rid of distractions rather than incorporating them in a larger unity. Novel reading ... aims at encompassing multitudes rather than eliminating superfluities."<sup>6</sup> As will be seen, for Rorty such notions as "enlargement," "distractions," "larger unity," and "multitudes" are all essential to literature's achievement of moral progress.

Imaginative narratives are, also, not about promoting a philosophy, ideology or particular ethical theory formulated by philosophers, social scientists or theologians. Rorty continually admonishes us to avoid ideology or theory in our reading of stories, and this includes expecting to find arguments in literary works. A novel simply does not, and cannot, put forth a litany of logical or quasi-logical arguments, just as it does not confirm or illustrate a particular theory or ideology. When Bloom advises on how to read, he points out how literature specialists of our time often use, for example, Heidegger-Derrida critiques of metaphysics or Marx-Foucault critiques of capitalism as ideological guides that tell readers "what to look for when reading imaginative literature." Rorty shares with Bloom the view that "the dominance in U.S. departments of literature first of 'theory' and then of 'cultural studies' has made it more difficult for students to read well ... such attempts to give politics or philosophy hegemony over literature diminish the redemptive power of works of the imagination."<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Rorty's preferred narratives steer clear of advocacy for particular philosophical theories of ethics. Literature that embraces "imaginative novelty, rather than argumentation ... does most for the autonomy of the entranced reader." While argumentative works of philosophy may offer novelty, and may transform a reader's life in some respect, Rorty again sides with Bloom when he writes: "the kind of autonomy he [Bloom] is thinking of is primarily the sort that liberates one from one's previous ways of thinking about the lives and fortunes of individual human beings,"<sup>8</sup> thereby allowing for expansion of imagination and sympathy. For Rorty works of literature "hint rather than proclaim, suggest rather than argue, and offer implicit rather than explicit advice."<sup>9</sup>

Ideology, "in the sense of a set of general ideas which provide a context in which the reader places every book

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, "Redemption From Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises," in: *The Rorty Reader*, eds. Christopher J. Volparil and Richard J. Bernstein (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 389-406.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389-390.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

she reads," turns out to be an enemy of reader sensibility and autonomy. Indeed, it may well promote bad reading habits. An ideal reader actually hopes that "the next book she reads will re-contextualize all the books she has previously read – that she will encounter an authorial imagination so strong as to sweep her off her feet, transporting her into a world she has never known existed."<sup>10</sup> Just as with all the authors and characters she has before known, so with her real life family and acquaintances, all may start to look different, regarding their thinking, motives and actions.

From the foregoing it should be evident that Rorty eschews any suggestion that a work of literary art seeks to advance a particular theory of ethics, philosophically or theologically conceived. Earlier we noted Rorty's rejection of religion in literature. Similarly, for Rorty, readers or critics debase, and unduly restrict, a novel by assuming, for instance, that it reflects or advances Kantian deontology, Mill's utilitarianism, Aristotle's conception of virtue ethics, etc. Though such readings have often been attempted,<sup>11</sup> the unfortunate outcome is that, in their zeal to attach every clue and nuance in the story to something that could be construed as like Kant or Mill, they overlook the obvious expansive, exploratory, imaginative prospects of the text. Instead of letting the work speak for itself and establish its own relations and projections, they funnel it through an apriori theoretical prism. They essentially beg the question insofar as they simply assume what they expect is *in* the work, and to no surprise, end up *finding it* in their interpretive reading. Rorty's approach to literature is wholly contrary.

Ethical theories are not in the narrative, and, therefore, narratives do not deliberately employ ethical theories to resolve dilemmas that arise in the course of the story.

Neither authors nor their characters are under any burden to come up with the right or best answers to moral dilemmas or controversies conjured by their stories. Fiction may shed important light on such matters – for instance, the agonizing difficulties of choice and action – but the larger purpose of the story is not to tell readers how to live or what their obligations are. No rule, principle or presumed universal ethical value guides the action or meaning of the story. In effect, a Rortyan approach to narrative is essentially anti-religious, anti-ideological, anti-philosophical in any normative or prescriptive sense.<sup>12</sup>

### III

humanistic intellectuals are  
"people trying to expand their own moral imaginations.  
These ... people read books in order to enlarge their  
sense of what is possible and important – either for  
themselves or for their society."

Rorty, "The Humanistic Intellectual:  
Eleven Theses"

"...we see both intellectual and moral progress not as  
a matter of getting closer to the True or the  
Good or the Right, but as an increase in imaginative  
power ... Imagination ... constantly operates so as to  
make the human future richer than  
the human past."

"Pragmatists think of moral progress as ... like sewing  
together a very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt."

Rorty, "Ethics Without Principles"

A number of Rorty's leading ideas about literature and morality were initially introduced in Section II, in summarizing what he is *not* saying about the matter. Therefore, in this section I simply attempt to draw together, somewhat more coherently, the notions integral to his overall view and without which we could

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>11</sup> Some clear examples include readings of the fiction of John Steinbeck, such as John Timmerman's deontological interpretation in his "John Steinbeck: An Ethics of Fiction" or John J. Han's "'I Want to Make 'Em Happy': Utilitarian Philosophy in Steinbeck's Fiction," both included in *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck*.

<sup>12</sup> Further evidence and confirmation of what Rorty rejects about the relation between literature and morality – and how "theory" or "ideology" or "philosophy" do not provide a method of reading or an ethic of reading – is found in "The Pragmatist's Progress: Umberto Eco on Interpretation," in: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) pp. 131-147.

not make much sense of how literature can, in fact, work toward moral progress.

Christopher Voparil, in his chapter, “The Politics of the Novel,” confirms that for Rorty “the novel is the primary vehicle of moral reflection in a liberal democratic culture.” Further, through what Rorty terms, “sentimental education” [enlarging the sentiments],

works like Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Nabokov’s *Lolita* ... can forge a democratic moral community of citizens attuned to suffering and more likely to see those different from themselves as ‘one of us.’ Because it is instrumental in fostering an ability to identify with the suffering of others, literature can be linked to the pursuit of justice, understood as a form of loyalty to other human beings.<sup>13</sup>

Eduardo Mendieta, in discussing Rorty’s understanding of the nature of philosophy and its role, points out that “A society with politics ... would have philosophy as a dialogue partner in the great conversation about what society should become.” However,

Philosophy has only poetry to offer, a type of inspirational jostling that foments a type of utopia that is generally expressed in literary terms ... When it [philosophy and literature] is not instigating our moral and social imaginaries, trying to expand our loyalties, it is performing the humble job of clearing the pathways to a better society.<sup>14</sup>

Both Rorty scholars point to five central themes that frame and express Rorty’s understanding of how narratives embrace morality and, in some instances, contribute to moral progress: moral imagination, sympathy and empathy, sentimental literature, expanded loyalty, and achieving a greater justice. In what follows I elaborate briefly on each, using Rorty’s seminal essay, “Ethics Without Principles,”<sup>15</sup> as a primary

touchstone for a summary, in my own words, of his key points. Throughout, we will do well to bear in mind Rorty’s account of his overriding objective in another leading essay, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” for his words provide foundation for the five principal themes. Writes Rorty, “My purpose ... is to develop an antithesis between the ascetic taste [of ascetic priests] for theory, simplicity, structure, abstraction, and essence and the novelist’s taste for narrative, detail, diversity and accident.”<sup>16</sup>

Imagination is the starting point for Rorty’s conception. In “Ethics Without Principles” he repeatedly speaks of the need for an increase in imaginative power. To this end, the reader’s encounter with a story may stimulate the imagination and open up a wider horizon of possibilities for how she understands herself and others, as well as her society and the world at large. Thus, Rorty’s initial focus is on individual persons – the creator of the narrative, the lives and experiences of the individual characters in the story, the reader as a unique person with a perspective, and, of course, the reader’s involvement with the characters and with others in her world. As noted earlier, the proliferation of imagination spawned by reading goes well beyond the boundaries of any theory, argument, principle or even basic emotions and feelings. At critical times narratives open up and vigorously challenge the moral imagination, causing the reader to both feel and reflect on motives, behaviors and their consequences, and how people can and do help or hurt others. In my own writing on John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* I demonstrate how the novella expands the range and complexity of fellow-feeling and, thereby, the moral experience of the reader, doing so through an imaginative leap inside the lives and experiences – personal, economic, political – of the main characters.

When the moral imagination is thus opened, a path is cleared for heightened awareness and sensitivity to the plights of others. The reader no longer simply

<sup>13</sup> Voparil is here distilling key ideas from Rorty’s essay, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” in Christopher J. Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> Eduardo Mendieta, “Introduction” to *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews With Richard Rorty*, pp. xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>15</sup> Rorty, “Ethics Without Principles,” in: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp. 72-90.

<sup>16</sup> Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens,” in: *The Rorty Reader*, p. 313.



intellectualizes or critiques a text, but rather takes the reading experience into her heart as well as mind. Rorty states, “it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing *sensitivity* to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things.”<sup>17</sup> Through sensitive reading the reader becomes more alert to the fullest dimensions of the story, particularly on an affective and social level. A character no longer stands simplistically for an idea or principle, for good or bad, but rather reflects a myriad complex of feelings, dreams and aspirations, regrets, and uncertainties about how to act and about what is good.

Enhanced sensitivity is the first move toward what Rorty calls sympathy for the characters and their lives. In his usage it is important to note that sympathy is not restricted to “feeling sorry for” or pitying another. In its deeper and more original sense, it denotes the prospects for sameness of feeling or affinity of one person for another, and elicits actions or responses that follow naturally from such affinity. It rests on a kind of mutual liking or understanding that further rests on the ability to enter into another person’s mental state – their feelings and desires. Rorty puts the matter very directly: “Moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy.”<sup>18</sup>

Sympathy, in this enlarged sense, opens to closely related empathy, a sort of personal identification (another favorite Rorty term) with another in order to better understand the person and hopefully feel something like what she feels. Rorty frequently alludes to how stories function in unique ways to cultivate greater empathy, in the concrete sense of causing the reader to experience some approximation of the pain and suffering of others. As we sense another’s pain, we naturally wonder about its causes. This provokes deeper, wider reflection on the problems and shortcomings of individuals and groups, their relations to one another, and of society more broadly. This essential Rortyan point

is echoed by other recent authors, whose new books on the troubled humanities, ruminate on the role of the humanities in creating a heightened alertness to the possibilities of being human, and how greater self-awareness leads to greater sympathy-empathy and appreciation for the predicaments of numerous, varied others.<sup>19</sup>

Literature that opens the moral imagination, thus providing a possibility of greater sensitivity and sympathy for the suffering of others, constitutes what Rorty at times refers to as a sentimental literature that facilitates sentimental education. Sentiment for Rorty appears to be a subtle combination of feelings and impressions that provide a basis for judgment and action. It reflects sensibility, delicacy and depth of emotion, and is similar to Hume’s notion of sentiment (rather than reason) as the basis of morality. Importantly, sentiment, or sentimental, are not disparaging terms for Rorty when applied to literature and the arts generally. In literary criticism there is a well established tradition in which the label “sentimental” marks a death blow for any work of fiction. A work deemed sentimental is thereby accused of being superficially emotional and maudlin, not guided by thoughtfulness, by reason. We can hear in this echoes of Aristotle’s explanation of how tragic poetry functions emotively or Plato’s denunciation of the poets as too emotional and distracting to reason. But, for Rorty, insofar as a sentimental story reflects tenderness, subtlety and depth of feeling – reaching widely into the reader’s experience and sensibility – it is a positive attribute. Such stories make possible the cultivating of sentiment – directed primarily toward the feelings and sufferings of others – and a kind of redemptive, sentimental education for readers and the communities they inhabit.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, “Ethics Without Principles,” p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010) and Geoffrey G. Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

The reader's growing connectedness with others, evolving from heightened awareness and identification through feeling with strong fictional characters, may gradually bring about what Rorty describes as a "greater we" and an "expanded loyalty." Recognizing that *they* are one of *us* begins with accepting characters in stories as being like us in fundamental ways, in our mutual capacities for change, suffering, growth, and dreams for a better future. This broadened appreciation for the plights of fictional characters then enables us to better comprehend our own predicaments. And as we gain broader and deeper self-awareness we begin to identify all the more with the problems of others. In a Deweyan pragmatist sense, Rorty's aspiration for a "greater we" reflects an expanded community of people who share common interests, experience, struggles, and goals. As Rorty says, "Moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-marking human selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those selves."<sup>20</sup>

Narratives help us, as readers, to understand the struggles people, and societies, undergo in search of freedom, equality, and fairness. This path of discovery may well begin with our own such struggles, but the narratives we embrace, and take into ourselves, make all the clearer the sense and extent to which all such difficult efforts, and the hardship and pain that accompany them, are common to peoples throughout the world, regardless of culture, religion or ethnicity. On Rorty's account this is all implicated in the struggle to achieve a "greater justice," put simply, to realize increased freedom, equality, and fairness in our own society and others around the world. He identifies such struggles in novels of moral protest by writers like Charles Dickens, James Baldwin, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, to name but a few. Their various fictions emphasize, for example, the detailed, negative impacts of economic class, racism and slavery on the lives of individuals, and how societal structures and institutions

thwart realization of freedom and equality. But they may, also, suggest ways in which people, drawn together as [reader] communities with common interests and purpose, can constructively work toward a brighter future characterized by expansions in freedom, equality, and fairness, to wit, a greater manifestation of justice. As Rorty writes, the basic moral dilemmas we confront are not conflicts between loyalty (i.e. to our family) and justice (i.e. for the whole of society), but rather conflicts "between loyalties to smaller groups and loyalties to larger groups."<sup>21</sup> When as readers, we think not just with our feelings but with accompanying critical reason, and when we deliberately seek a larger loyalty (greater justice), we are engaged in two sides of the same activity. Indeed,

any unforced agreement between individuals and groups about what to do creates a form of community, and will, with luck, be the initial stage in expanding the circles of those whom each party to the agreement had previously taken to be 'people like ourselves.' The opposition between rational argument and fellow-feeling thus begins to dissolve.<sup>22</sup>

Skillfully drawn narratives about people and their situations have far greater efficacy in launching this process than does any theory or ideology.

In sum for Rorty there exists a line of evolution from opening the moral imagination, to enhanced sympathy-empathy, to cultivating proper moral sentiments, to expanded loyalty and the pursuit of a greater justice. What he calls "inspirational literature" and "inspired reading" can uniquely and powerfully merge in this development. When Rorty attributes inspirational value to works of literature, he means that such works "make people think there is more to this life than they ever imagined."<sup>23</sup> Such works have "nothing to do with eternity, knowledge, or stability, and everything to do with futurity and hope – with taking the world by the

<sup>20</sup> Rorty, "Ethics Without Principles," p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty, "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," p. 434.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441.

<sup>23</sup> Rorty, "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," in: *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 133.

throat and insisting that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.”<sup>24</sup> And, perhaps somewhat ironically, on Rorty’s terms, it may even be possible to hope for a new found religion of literature “in which works of the secular imagination replace Scripture as the principal source of inspiration and hope for each new generation.”<sup>25</sup> Even though he here refers to the possibility of a new found “religion of literature” it would be, in my view, mistaken to conclude the Rorty is re-introducing religion or a religious world view in any customary sense. Key words in the above quotation are “secular” and “replace Scripture.”

While some may speculate that Rorty’s thinking about the role of literature in the reader’s private development or private reflection (as found, for example, in some aspects of his analyses of Nabokov and Proust) retains some elements from religion, I think this is clearly secondary to his main point. Literature for Rorty is essentially a secular endeavor. It constitutes a living assembly of texts (stories) that may well (and happily) supplant profound religious texts as principal sources of hope and inspiration. Rorty’s “religion of literature,” and his continual use of the word “redemption,” does not connote any sort of redemption or deliverance from evil, any spiritual cleansing that may lead to salvation or another, better life, or even moral purification. For Rorty redemption need have little or nothing to do with religion or religious experience as traditionally understood. Contrarily, his approach to the novel suggests a possible redemption (recovery from) the insularity of individual persons, from exclusive fixation on self-interest, the impotency of imagination, the sadness of callous hearts, and from the tyranny of theory. This is all of a piece with literature, as conceived by Rorty, stimulating the sort of inspired and enraptured readings of texts that he considers the mark of a pragmatist method of approach, one that focuses chiefly

on making the text, the story, useful, as opposed to getting it right.<sup>26</sup>

#### IV

“...when you weigh the good and the bad that the social novelists have done against the good and the bad that the social theorists have done, you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories.”

Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens”

“There is more significant philosophy in the American novel than there is in the output of our philosophy departments.”

Gustav Emil Mueller, “Philosophy in The Twentieth Century Novel”

In the spirit of pragmatism, the veracity and fruitfulness of Rorty’s ideas on literature and moral progress will, in large part, be a function of their application and usefulness. To what extent then are his notions helpful in reading certain writers and their novels? In what respects do such novels reflect the process of reader-story interaction Rorty describes? Earlier I cited the writers Dickens, Baldwin, and Stowe, all of whom Rorty shows appreciation for as vivid examples of the struggle for an “expanded we” and a “greater justice.” He would be inclined I think to call certain of their works “sentimental novels” that induce enhanced moral feelings and reflection. His comments on them are brief and sporadic, spread through various of the essays cited earlier, but he would count these authors as among those who may well contribute to moral progress, so long as their works are not read, as is typical, through a restrictive funnel of theory, ideology or pre-defined set of values. Accordingly, I propose that a close, openly imaginative reading or re-reading of *Bleak House* or *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* begins to add fleshy detail to Rorty’s grandest hopes and aspirations for stories.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>26</sup> A brilliant and concise account of the difference between methodical and inspired readings can be found in Rorty’s “The Pragmatist’s Progress,” pp. 145-146.

Probably the most sustained and elaborated application of Rorty's manner of reading and interpretation involves Milan Kundera, Vladimir Nabokov, and George Orwell. Kundera is something of a literary hero for Rorty. His views on the imaginative world of the novel (as expressed, for example, in *The Art of the Novel*), and the extent to which they countervail philosophy and ideological certitudes, coincide with Rorty's own ideal of a democratic, liberal utopia in large part facilitated by narratives. But his most extensive treatment of writers would be Nabokov and Orwell. Rorty lauds both for getting inside of (and sensitizing audiences to) the cruelty and humiliation suffered by many, whether stemming from individuals, groups or institutions. The two chapters on these authors in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* are well known to students of Rorty's work, and will not be analyzed here. Suffice it to say that both are of considerable importance in getting a fuller grasp on Rorty's views, and a thoughtful re-reading of either becomes a prime moment for concretizing Rorty's generalities.<sup>27</sup>

To extend the range of speculative application a bit further, I will suggest the work of fellow American and I believe kindred spirit, John Steinbeck. Rorty writes favorably, albeit very briefly, of Steinbeck on several occasions. For instance, he points to a scene in *The Grapes of Wrath* as being "Perhaps the most vivid description of the American concept of fraternity." The scene involves the sharing of limited food with a starving migrant family and Rorty writes, "As long as people in trouble can sacrifice to help people who are in still worse trouble, Steinbeck insisted, there is fraternity, and therefore social hope."<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, he categorizes *Grapes* as a socialist novel of the 1930's era written "in the belief that the tone of the Gettysburg Address was

absolutely right, but that our country would have to transform itself in order to fulfill Lincoln's hopes."<sup>29</sup>

Steinbeck, like Rorty, was largely a man of America, made in part from the cloth, the very texture of this land – its history, culture and ideals. He was a man of deep-seated hope who firmly believed in the prospects of progressive, evolutionary development of man and society over long swaths of time. Steinbeck embraced a profound sense of meliorism that I believe Rorty shares. Steinbeck believed in what he termed the infinite perfectibility of man though it could, of course, never be fully realized. Rorty is of similar mind when he writes, "you cannot aim at moral perfection, but you can aim at taking more people's needs into account."<sup>30</sup> For Steinbeck there was the ever-present possibility of achieving a greater and more efficacious community, growing out of sensitivity to others, trust, loyalty, and basic friendship. Witness, for instance, his masterful treatments of human community in works like *Of Mice and Men*, *Cannery Row* as well as *Grapes of Wrath*. Moreover, Steinbeck had an inherent environmental and global sensibility and understanding well before we had wide spread recognition of or even a vocabulary for such things, while many of his leading characters are culturally diverse (Mexicans, Asians, native Americans) and sympathetically related to one another in ways Rorty would very likely approve. Importantly, these characters often struggle together, in relative solidarity, in seeking greater fairness, equitable treatment, and improved living conditions. To use Rorty's term, they display enthusiasm for a "greater justice."

Therefore, I offer a modest suggestion – that Rorty would have found fertile narrative ground for instantiating his ideas about literature and morality in Steinbeck novels beyond *The Grapes of Wrath* – the Pulitzer prize winning, quintessential story of Depression-era America and its moral response to

<sup>27</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty" (pp. 141-168) and "The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty" (pp. 169-188), in: *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Richard Rorty, "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096," in: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 248.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Rorty, "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey," in: *Achieving Our Country*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Rorty, "Ethics Without Principles," p. 83.

economic as well as political and individual desperation. He would no doubt have found what is arguably the most powerful and dramatically moving illustration of loyalty and friendship anywhere in American literature in *Of Mice and Men*. He would have, also, witnessed there a lived sense of fraternity amongst members of the economic underclass, in this case, migrant laborers, and their collective need to articulate the suffering and injustice of a class system structured around heartless owners and contingent laborers. He would have “felt” the living, day-to-day experience of debilitating racism and sexism in the characters of Crooks and Curly’s wife. There is good reason why *Of Mice and Men* – as novella, multiple movies, and various stage plays – remains so popular today, with respect to sales and audience reception. A Rortyan explanation seems to me part of it. *Of Mice and Men* grabs readers and viewers at a deep affective level, evoking their sympathies for the plight of powerless, everyday people whom Steinbeck masterfully develops into heroic-like fictional characters capable of moving people to action. His characters, through the power of narrative, make us suffer with them. They make us entertain the very real possibility of an “expanded we.”

In *Cannery Row* Rorty would have seen, in the context of a raucous and satirically hilarious story about a collection of social misfits, a passionate and expansive exploration of human community – its meaning for simple people, how it gets formed, and what its prospective ramifications are. *Cannery Row* tweaks our collective funny bones, challenges our finer moral sensibilities, as it gladdens our hearts with the redemptive power of human fellowship and its liberating potentialities. Once again, loyalty and friendship merge to elevate the human spirit out of the vagaries of subsistence living, to achieve levels of mutual understanding, satisfaction, even joy, that the material conditions would seemingly never make possible.

In the lesser known but hugely popular (particularly in Europe) WW II-era novel, *The Moon Is Down*, Rorty

would revel in the emerging resistance movement among residents of a small Norwegian (so it is assumed) town that comes to be invaded and occupied by fictionalized German Nazis. How the citizens and their local leaders gradually, surreptitiously, invisibly band together, in an uprising of sticks and stones and spirit over guns and bombs, is eloquent testimony to the power of human dignity and freedom. Quite simply, the townspeople cannot, will not, live under oppression. They are persons and they must be free. They must reverse the injustice of occupation and, miraculously, they pull it off. The story is hopeful and inspiring, and naturally reverberated with thousands of underground readers throughout Europe during the war years. While an admitted work of propaganda, it, nonetheless, has lasting effect on the human pursuit of freedom and justice. It advances Rorty’s aspirations for narratives that make a difference.

Lastly, I hope eventually to develop a separate paper that will attempt a Rortyan interpretation of the moral dimensions of Steinbeck’s final and frequently overlooked novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the one work in his corpus that Steinbeck identified as being simply about morals and morality. But for now, in closing this section, I simply allude to a bold statement Steinbeck makes in the frontispiece to the book. He warns that instead of trying to identify specific fictional people or places in the story, readers would do better, “to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today.”<sup>31</sup> Rorty would surely have resonated to this admonition. In considering Steinbeck’s all too briefly referenced works here, and in imaginatively speculating on the guiding spirits of both John Steinbeck and Richard Rorty, we can best grasp hold of both by bearing in mind Rorty’s generic instruction to readers of stories: “people merely need to turn their eyes toward those who are getting hurt and notice the *details* of the pain being

<sup>31</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent* (New York: Viking Press, 1961).



suffered...”<sup>32</sup> When once asked by a graduate student what his philosophy was, Steinbeck responded, somewhat tongue in cheek, by saying he had no idea really. What he did know is that innocent people get hurt and suffer, and he did not like it. He thought we all needed to work, in our various ways, to put a stop to it.

## V

A tentative appraisal of Rorty on literature and moral progress might evolve from a few observations and questions. I conclude the paper by raising at least some of them. Some critics might note that Rorty’s radical ideas landed him on the fringes of academe, summarily dismissed (or worse, condemned) by both philosophers and literature specialists. How could he ever be taken seriously without a firm disciplinary home and accepted philosophical methodology? In the end, this mattered little to Rorty, and it should matter little to us, students of Rorty. Among his lasting achievements was to show us all the full and genuine possibilities of interdisciplinary inquiry. He demonstrates convincingly the superiority of pragmatic pluralism and diversity, outgrowths of interdisciplinarity, to the more fashionable multiculturalism that has gripped the academy for at least the last three decades. Rorty breaks down walls, and no better example could be offered than his outlook on morality and ethics. For him ethics is not just the province of philosophy or religion. It is found with equal force and vigor in the arts and literature. While some critics may condemn him for mixing politics and ethics with literature, alleging a consequent diminution in aesthetic integrity or purity, Rorty believes that narratives, messy and realistic as they may be, are for the purpose of opening up imagination and linking people together. For him, traditional aesthetic values are to be supplanted by sensibility, community building, and the pursuit of justice. Put simply, his overriding objectives for literature are radically different, and must, in fairness, be understood and assessed on their own terms.

Some may claim that Rorty’s notion of moral progress applies only to particular, limited authors and selected texts. Obviously, his own literary illustrations are pointed and reflect his favorites. But I would respond in two ways. First, I think it entirely plausible that more works could well be included within the Rorty inventory. If we exercise, with Rorty, narrative and moral imagination and look carefully, we may well come up with a variety of narratives from different periods, styles and locations. My earlier speculations about Steinbeck were meant to tentatively illustrate this point. Secondly, it would not be entirely wrong to charge a certain limitation involved in Rorty’s thinking about the novel, but such charge misses a fundamental point about literary theory. Any and all theories of literature are, by their very nature, selective as to the particular works of literature that serve to best illustrate what the theory is saying. To be more precise, Rorty’s preferred works are what he variously calls the “literature of moral protest,” “sentimental literature,” or “inspirational literature,” and we have identified several examples earlier. Surely, within America alone, following modernism, writers like Barth, Pynchon, De Lillo, and Auster have experimented with the disappearance of strong characters and plot. Indeed, they may be seen as having given up altogether on typical notions of plot development or characters capable of inducing moral progress. They display serious reservations about the power of language or any literary form to grasp reality, including social reality, let alone advance it along. This, for sure, is not Rorty’s “literature of social hope.” He is aware of such writers and their works, referring to them in *Achieving Our Country* as a literature of “acquiescence in the end of American hope.” While I do not think he could truly engage such works, or have much to say about them, Rorty’s dismissive posture toward such novels does not negate such an alternative way of conceiving and executing the novel. It is simply not the sort of literature that confirms, illustrates or advances his notion of what literature is and what it is capable of accomplishing within the human community. This is hardly different in any meaningful way from, for example, Sartre’s rejection (in *What is Literature?*) of the

<sup>32</sup> Rorty, “Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens,” p. 319.

so-called “pure poetry” of Valéry and Mallarmé because it was too formalistic, ethereal, and abstracted from living social realities. It is no coincidence that Sartre’s own socio-political theory of literature is best understood and illustrated by reference to his literary works – *Nausea*, *No Exit*, *The Flies* – or to texts like Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*. Likewise, we should not forget that Aristotle (in his *Poetics*) clearly had *Oedipus* in view as both inspiration and illustration for his theory of literature as organic unity that imitates nature and causes a purgation of the emotions. Obviously, there exists a great and wonderful variety of literary works and literary theories. Equally as obvious, no one theory could ever engage or explain such wide variation in forms, styles and thematic emphases. But this need not diminish the significance or applicability of any theory of literature. It simply confirms that the nature and function of literary art is too vast and diverse a subject matter to be adequately handled by a single conception. In short, I do not believe Rorty would have much interest in the experimental literature mentioned above, but this in no way defuses the significance of his own ideas about literature and morality.

Some would no doubt want to ask Rorty whether moral progress can be measured? Is there a scale of justice or fairness within literature, within the real world outside the narrative? How would we ever know when justice is achieved, and how could it ever be confirmed, one way or the other, that the reading of stories had anything to do with human actions? While these seem reasonable questions, they tend to miss Rorty’s point. Of course, there is no scale or measure of moral progress, other than generally improving social conditions, no mechanism that could definitively prove that progress has been realized and that novels have somehow contributed to it. Rorty’s ideas are projective, enveloped by hope and human ideals. He is not interested in proof or precise calculation. If a narrative cannot, does not, give us a precise position on anything, why would anyone even want a specific measure of its effects and

outcomes? Such questioning reflects the sort of analytic or logical temper in which Rorty does not traffic. Lack of precise measurement or proof, however does not belie the efficacy of narratives or Rorty’s ideas about just how they work.

I suspect that Rorty’s lasting legacy on the question of literature, and its relation to morality and moral progress, will be the extent to which he worked assiduously and creatively to liberate both literature and morality from the tyranny of theory and ideology. In his pushing of boundaries, he has opened up the space for a fresh start. He has given legitimacy to the moral imagination, and vitality to the role of moral experience in our reflection and action, both individually and collectively. As an antidote to the sterile, purely academic analyses of much of literary and ethical theory, he has infused literature and philosophy with hope and very real human purpose. For this we should be forever in his debt.

## PRAGMATISM AND POETRY:

### THE NEO-PRAGMATIST DIFFERENCE IN THE DISCUSSION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

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It seems that it should be easy to talk about pragmatism and poetry. There have been numerous, well-researched connections and mutual influences going back and forth between American poets and American pragmatist philosophers for decades. These affinities have been discussed by some key literary critics representing various schools of thought and generations. Richard Poirier has done a lot in his *Poetry and Pragmatism* to establish a firm linearity linking Emerson, via William James, with such key figures of American poetry as Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens.<sup>1</sup> Continuing this line, the crucial role of Emerson's concepts in influencing American modernist poetics has been affirmed by Jonathan Levin, who, with Emerson on his mind, has called this mode "the poetics of transition" in a study by the same title.<sup>2</sup> Another important critic, Frank Lentricchia, concentrating less on Emerson, has also emphasized the role that the Harvard intellectual climates, shaped by the near-pragmatist discussion maintained by James, Royce and Santayana, had on the shaping of the aesthetic poetic views of Stevens, Frost, Eliot and Pound.<sup>3</sup> James's influence as a philosopher of the psychology of belief has been discussed, in relation to Hulme, Pound, and Stevens, by Patricia Rae.<sup>4</sup> In a more recent study, Joan Richardson, a premiere Stevens scholar, constructed a much larger narrative which

shows Emerson, pragmatist philosophers, and modernist American poets, notably Stevens, as reciprocally nurturing voices belonging to one larger stream of American thought, which dates back to Jonathan Edwards and the intellectual culture of the Puritans, and which anticipates the findings of 20<sup>th</sup> century science in the fields of psychology and physics.<sup>5</sup> Dewey's influences, although they seem to be referred to less frequently, have not gone unnoticed. His version of the ties binding democracy with the need for experiment had its poetic counterpart in the poetics of William Carlos Williams, a relation that has also been pointed to by John Beck.<sup>6</sup>

The connections between pragmatism and poetry are not limited to the modernist phase of American poetry. Among the younger generation of critics, Andrew Epstein has used Emerson's views on the contingent nature of the self to discuss the rich interplay of the aesthetic and the personal that contributed to the overall artistic success of the New York school of poetry.<sup>7</sup> Michael Magee, in turn, has shown the combined influence of Emerson and Dewey on the New York poetic avant-gardes, which, precisely because of the Emersonian-Deweyan influence, produce forms of political efficacy and engagement.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, despite all this rich record of connections, there lingers a sense of something uncertain, undecided, a chance unrealized, a blurred area of disappointment. It seems that much more should be made of the suggested intellectual and aesthetic commerce. The map of the liaisons established so far seems very unstable and pale.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism & American Literary Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Rae, *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997).

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<sup>5</sup> Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey and American Cultural Politics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004).

Pragmatism and poetry remain close, but pragmatism does not seem to have produced any more lasting platform of discussion that would be influential for our thinking about poetry, and markedly different from other theoretical approaches. On the contrary, pragmatism, with its vast poetic potential, seems merely, at best, to echo the theses of indeterminacy of meaning and instability of the self that have, much more forcibly, been imposed by approaches which, in fact, operate on terrain that was originally opened by early pragmatist thought. What is an even more serious problem is the position of some critics who, like Charles Altieri, claim openly, if mistakenly, that pragmatism simply does not offer anything new or sustainable in the area of the aesthetics of the poetic text.<sup>9</sup>

Without engaging directly with views so openly unfavorable to pragmatism at this point, I am going to follow my opposite intuition and try to return to neo-pragmatism, in a variety of its formulations and derivations, in order to look for such perspectives on it that will show it as an aesthetic/philosophical platform offering an alternative to other currently prevailing approaches. That this is a worthwhile project is suggested by a large blank spot found in the middle of the existing work by the literary critics. None of the studies conducted by the literary critics sympathetic to

pragmatism mentioned above makes an important case or argument based on the work of the contemporary neo-pragmatists. Among these, the biggest stress is, as I signaled above, on the classical phase of the development of pragmatism, the ideas of James and Dewey, and modernist poetry. Even the studies that make forays into the area of contemporary poetry treat pragmatism as if it ceased evolving, coming to a full stop with Dewey's contribution. The work of Rorty is either ignored or openly dismissed.<sup>10</sup> Shusterman's work is not very popular among American literary critics either. What is more, there are some important writers, for example Alexander Nehamas, presenting views on aesthetics that make them important allies of pragmatist aesthetics, who also seem to be neglected in poetry studies. The result of the lack of proper attention to the potential that neo-pragmatism may bring into the discussion of poetry is that the existing pragmatist literary criticism often sounds as if it were repeating a message that already belongs elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> In the following article, I am going to refer to Rorty, Donald Davidson, Alexander Nehamas, and Richard Shusterman, in order to show in what way their writing offers a specific cluster of ideas providing inspiration for critics

<sup>9</sup> Charles Altieri, "Practical Sense – Impractical Objects: Why Neo-Pragmatism Cannot Sustain an Aesthetics," in: *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Vol. 15 (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), pp. 113-136. Altieri denies neo-pragmatism any interesting aesthetic capacity. Addressing Rorty, the critic argues that pragmatism is incapable of dealing with aesthetic objects which aim at the evasive areas that matter precisely because they escape any given set of sentence protocols. Altieri's reading of Rorty, Poirier, and Rae suggests that their argument will inevitably ignore the subtleties of the text to make it dependent on the ready-made network of beliefs and desires. Shusterman's attempt to divorce genius from extreme originality (developed in *Practicing Philosophy*) does not win Altieri's favor either, as unconvincing in its combination of meliorism and aesthetic values. For Altieri, such combination is always detrimental to the aesthetic.

<sup>10</sup> Richardson and Epstein only glance over Rorty; Magee is openly critical and dismissive.

<sup>11</sup> By ignoring these new texts in pragmatism, the existing critical approaches miss a lot. They become easy targets for such critics as Altieri, who has shown, for example, how Poirier relies too much on Emerson, and how he belittles Stevens's play with the structure of belief. On other occasions, by not going beyond Dewey toward, say, the alliance of Rorty and Nehamas, these studies do become vulnerable to charges of instrumental treatment of the poetic text. I do not think it is an accident that a critic largely enthusiastic about pragmatism, who, like Michael Magee, has written in an illuminating manner about Frank O'Hara, has not been able to deal with O'Hara's friend and poetic rival John Ashbery. On the other hand, when they are engaged, the pragmatist views do not seem to offer much more than the message already honed by post-structuralism and deconstruction. Levine and Epstein, as well as Poirier, can, at best, point out that the message of the transient character of the self and knowledge claims was first explored and employed by Emerson and the classical pragmatists, not by the French theory.

and poets alike by reinterpreting their understanding of the tasks and potentialities of poetic language.

There is strangeness and force in the new American pragmatism, which is difficult to articulate, and which stems from its unique combination of “the will to believe,” or participate in one’s reality, despite the full awareness of its provisional and contingent character. If properly evaluated, this quality would make neo-pragmatism a more fascinating partner for contemporary poetry, which often seeks beauty that “exists by logic of strange position,” to use a phrase from the poet John Ashbery.<sup>12</sup> To appreciate the neo-pragmatist position would mean to enter a radically unfounded, and thus ironical, participation in the orders of reality in which their permanently unstable, and thus poetically defamiliarized character, is a spur to their change, and in which the center of significance is shifted from “matter,” “materiality,” and “language” back to the non-foundationally understood human productivity of meaning. This position, as I will try to show, is the irony of radical pragmatist post-humanism whose difference with other theories lies in its refusal to either explain or justify the human by recourse to any sort of the inhuman. When applied to poetry, this excess should result in new critical language in which the message of the “death” of the traditional lyrical subject would give way to a flexible, ironically distanced, and yet significant sense of the selves that emerge inevitably whenever a poetically enhanced play of meanings is involved.

To outgrow and move past the already aged message of the various forms of the simple demise of the authorial subject would also mean to regulate the ongoing discussion of the relation between the language of poetry, its material layer, and its relation to the material world. Over large areas of the debates circling around American poetry, the thesis of the disappearance of the traditional lyrical subject, often supported by French

post-structuralism, has gone hand in hand with the emergence of a form of objectivity sought in an enhanced adherence to the material layer of the poetic language and the bare materiality of the physical world.

The combination of the increased attention to the autonomous materiality of language and the banishing of forms of individual subjectivity is best observed in American poetry in the close proximity of the theory and practice of the LANGUAGE poets and many younger poets influenced by it. Although the LANGUAGE movement, with its derivations, does not by any means exhaust the rich and dynamic poetic scene in America, its theoretical advancement is an important indicator of the larger tendencies in American poetry. It is against the variety of materialism and its companion notion of the dispersal of the authorial self professed by this poetic/theoretical formation that the originality and difference of the neo-pragmatist program for the discussion of poetry may become visible.

### The Materiality of LANGUAGE

When Charles Bernstein opens his volume of essays, *The Content’s Dream*, he develops a concept of poetry as a mode of objective thought in artificially created poetic forms, or measures. These are not, of course, to be employed for their own sake, but for their capacity of exposing the material features of language itself. Language takes center stage, as it is modulated by the artifice of the poetic form. Only in such language can significant communication take place. To be sure, this is not a communication from a “subject” or “speaker”; rather, it is the generalized, not quite personalized, “mental being” that can now enjoy a renewed contact with the world. Combining ideas on language from Wittgenstein and Benjamin, Bernstein stresses the fact that, since there are no mental essences beyond the fact of language (Wittgenstein’s lesson), “languages therefore have no speaker if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages, [not *in* them]”

<sup>12</sup> John Ashbery, “Le livre est sur la table,” in: *The Mooring of Starting Out* (Hopewell, New Jersey: Ecco, 1997), p. 56.



(Benjamin's lesson).<sup>13</sup> With this shift from the speaker, or language user, to language itself, we become attentive to a larger notion of language, all sorts of sign systems, or even "nameless, non-acoustic languages, languages issuing form matter."<sup>14</sup> Among these systems, according to Benjamin, who is here closely followed by the American critic, we "recall the material community of things in their communication."<sup>15</sup>

This line is developed in a later collection of essays by Bernstein's colleague and one of the central figures of the LANGUAGE movement, Lyn Hejinian, entitled tellingly, *Language of Inquiry*. The title is important: it points immediately in the direction of the hoped for efficacy of poetry as a special language of open-mindedness and lack of prejudice characteristic of science in its neutral approach to its materials. In an essay called "Strangeness," one of the central pieces of the volume, Hejinian presents her program for such refurbishing of the poetic language that would liberate poetry's apparently natural capacity for realistic and objective adherence to the world's *physis*. The crux of the matter is to realize the necessity of moving from the order of the metaphor to that of metonymy. Metaphor, with its affinity with the symbol, belongs to a pre-established code. In short, language based on metaphor is too prone to fall victim to all sorts of pre-established traps of ideology. Metonymy, meanwhile, by relying on a greater accidentality of contiguous connections, relations that are both less predictable (not pre-imposed or prefigured by the limitations of the code) and objective, gives us a better, more condensed rendering of the material context. In other words, it is the "incremental," objectified manner of metonymy that makes it a more suitable tool of inquiry, such as the one found in science. With it, we obtain "direct and sensuous

contact with the concrete and material world."<sup>16</sup> Should poetic language be able to follow such instruction, it would attain the desired state of realistic objectivity in which "the materials of nature speak."<sup>17</sup>

A more recent evolution of this widespread and influential tendency toward material objectivity is observed in the writings of Gerald Bruns. In his earlier works, Bruns reaches back to Mallarmé as the precursor of the idea of "pure" language, freed from its bondage to the senses and meanings of the everyday world.<sup>18</sup> This reading of Mallarmé is later developed toward a new sense of "objectivism" in poetry, in which the modernists such as William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky are early forerunners of such important experimental poets of today as Steve McCaffery or Clark Coolidge. All of these poets work with the intuition isolated by Bruns and earlier traced back to Mallarmé, according to which the poetic resides in freeing language of its everyday uses and the controlling regime of the human meanings toward the pure materiality of the sign and sound. It is in such strategies that poets like McCaffery and Coolidge manage to push poetry beyond the genre stage of the lyric. The lyric recedes and gives way to a purer, non-hierarchical use of language. A poem by McCaffery is praised as "an unmediated inscription of the materiality of the letter."<sup>19</sup>

The special interest and gain of Bruns's objectivist line is that it frees language from the apparently false and

<sup>13</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-84*, (Los Angeles: Sun&Moon, 1986), p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, of course, pushes aside the whole load of Mallarmean ideas that smack simply of a strongly metaphysical or openly religious inclination vividly present in the French poet. In his letters, Mallarmé confessed that he wanted to free language toward what he called pure poetry, "divorce it from dreams and chance" and make it aspire to "the idea of the universe." See Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 103.

<sup>19</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *The Material of Poetry* (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 10.

misleading filter of human ideas, which obliterate a clearer view of the world. The post-LANGUAGE poets realize Williams's project in which "what the poet is after is not realism, but reality itself."<sup>20</sup> In Bruns, this becomes a project of experiencing a non-mediated life of objects. One poet who seems to have perfected this technique, even beyond the achievement of the American post-LANGUAGE poets, is the French poet Francis Ponge. His curious descriptive forms are presented by Bruns as the true achievement of the poetic of materialism. In Ponge's texts, objects receive a treatment in which they fully come to life. There is justice done to the inanimate world that was never possible before. For Bruns, Ponge's "objectivism" is found in siding with things, for once, against the intruding presence of the human. This kind of writing lifts the sentence of oblivion, formerly imposed on the thingness of things by the humanized psychology of the traditional lyric.

The common aim of the new poetic materialism and objectivism could be variously described as the elimination of the idea of individual subjectivity, of the uniqueness or originality of the personas or voices speaking in poetry, and, ultimately, the overcoming of humanism, realizing the variously prophesized "end of man." This abolishing of individual subjectivity is already visible in Bernstein. We have seen how he works with Wittgenstein's and Benjamin's ideas on language in order to dispense with the view of the speaker as a subject who exists before language, and then comes to language in order to produce an expression of this subjectivity. Speakers exist *in* the language; they do not communicate *through* it. Could such fully linguistic existence, the being *in* the language, lead to the emergence of some sort of individualistic subjectivity? In Bernstein, whatever subjectivity may emerge, must be fully public, non-private, and thus non-individual. Writing as a form of thinking within the formats of the poetic measure creates a division in the self, its

separation from its very private experience. Whatever there was of the uniqueness in the measure (form) employed in the poem cannot testify to the emergence of the self thought of as an entity endowed with separateness or individuality. On the contrary, even though the poetic process might begin in the necessary solitude, the solitary self disappears. Writing as poetically measured thinking gives us "a privacy in which the self itself disappears and leaves us the world" (82). Since "the world" is necessarily a shared area, this, obviously, is no privacy at all.<sup>21</sup>

A similar disappearance of the separate, individual self is noted by Hejinian. Here, the metonymic inquiry and the resultant immediacy of contact with the material of the world simply disperses the self. The objective being of the world overwhelms and obliterates the being of an "I," however conceived. As Hejinian puts it, the "language of inquiry" simply "dispossesses" the "I." The poetic "I" is treated almost as the ego of a scientist: it must be fully objectified and erased. Hejinian quotes Adorno: "the boundary between what is human and the world of things becomes blurred."<sup>22</sup>

The rejection of human individual subjectivity has recently received an even stronger formulation from Bruns. The critic's earlier advocacy of the new objectivism in the languages of poetry, which I have presented above, has now evolved, by way of Bruns's combined reading of Levinas, Agamben, and Deleuze and Guattari, toward the idea of a possibility of experience in which the human element itself loses all of its human identity and melts with its environment. What

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<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that in the fragment from Benjamin that Bernstein quotes, the idea of the all-pervading proliferation of language makes nature dependent on its articulation through language, which, in turn, returns us to the notion of persons (it is persons who are doing the articulation). The notion of a "person" implies "personality" and separateness from other personalities. Bernstein does not take up this direction. See Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 147.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Bruns is trying to liberate from the cybernetic regimes of Cartesian subjectivity is what he names, after Levinas, “the human at the level of the singular – that is ‘prior to the distinction between the particular and the universal’.”<sup>23</sup> A human creature so conceived is less a nominative I, burdened with Cartesian tasks of representation, than a corporeal, flesh endowed, accusative *moi*, relating with the world in “a mode of sensibility or exposure to the touch.”<sup>24</sup> In this mode, importantly, the human regains contact with its flesh, rather than just having a body, the latter being a controllable construct of the homogenizing social systems.

The whole project is one of the de-creation of the subject. The “flesh” that the subject existing in the accusative mode of touch and sensibility recaptures belongs to the area of “bare life.” The term, borrowed from Agamben, signifies the state of “sovereignty” achieved by stepping into the freedom of animal non-identity, “a condition of exteriority, in which, by a sovereign decision, a human being ceases to be regarded or treated as human.”<sup>25</sup> It is in such animal “solar experience” of community with the rest of being, outside any cybernetic controlling system, that the organism achieves freedom, and sheds the misery of the human.<sup>26</sup> The entry into this mode also entails the shift to what Bruns is calling, after Deleuze and Guattari, “the body without organs.”<sup>27</sup> The “bare life” of the “body without organs” introduces the creature, now trans-human or trans-animal, into the condition of non-identity in which it escapes the false political identifications of the homogenous social order.

The discussion on and around American poetry that I am outlining is conducted by both poets and critics. So far I

have discussed the views of literary critics. Before I move on to the poets, I would like to mark the difficulty of such an easy division between theoreticians and practitioners. Among the critics discussed above, two of them, Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian, are also well-recognized and influential poets. The situation in American poetry has long ceased to be one in which a poetic talent, free from the influences of theory and theoretical poetics, simply submits poetic texts to be explicated with the use of academic theoretical tools. The two practices are now much intertwined. Some American poets engage in critical prose; others, who do not, are aware of the philosophical instruments used by the critics.

There is also a larger consequence of such cross-insemination. Within the excess of interpenetrating ideas we might register an alliance of critical and theoretical concepts that have been derived inductively by the study of homegrown American traditions with ideas imported to America from continental philosophy, primarily post-Heideggerian, French post-structuralism. Gerald Bruns’s writings present a good example of such synthesis. Again, these imports do not exist in “pure” forms and are by no means an exclusive property of critics. The philosophical-theoretical concepts themselves have been so pervasive that they now inform the thinking and awareness of both those who write poems, when they write poems, and those who write critical essays, when a critical essay is what they set out to write.

And yet, with all this free evolution of concepts, writing formats, and influences, there emerges a clear affinity between the criticism of the human based individualized subjectivity present amidst the indigenous, American poetic traditions, and the huge boost given to this criticism by French, post-Heideggerian theory. It is against the background of this alliance, clearly at work amidst the LANGUAGE and post-LANGUAGE critical/poetic milieu, that the neo-pragmatist theoretical

<sup>23</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *On Ceasing to Be Human* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 28-29.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

difference I am going to present will become clear. Thus, before I move on to present a sketch of the neo-pragmatist stance on poetic aesthetics, I am going to briefly discuss three poets whose work testifies to the merger of American traditions and French theory.

#### **The LANGUAGE Practice and the Death of the Individualized Subject.**

The first of these poets is Jack Spicer, whose technical and procedural innovation in the 1950's more than justifies his frequent identification as a proto-LANGUAGE poet. An important figure of the San Francisco renaissance of the 1950's, Spicer created a peculiar understanding of the state in which the poet is found when approaching poetry and language. In a poem called "Thing Language," whose central metaphor brings together the mass of language and the ocean, Spicer writes: "A drop / Or crash of water. It means / Nothing. / It is bread and butter / Pepper and salt. The death / That young men hope for. Aimlessly / it pounds the shore."<sup>28</sup> The poetic utterance comes from a special space in which the voice sounds as if its source was situated somewhere in the realm of the inanimate and inhuman. The poem enters the realm of inanimate matter, and this entry is enhanced by the disjunctive, syntactically distortive form, clearly anticipatory of the later experiment of the LANGUAGE group. There is a depersonalization in these poems; what speaks is not a "persona," "lyrical subject," or "ego," but the substance of the inanimate, the world of non-organic minerals, "salt" more than "pepper."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jack Spicer, "Thing Language," in: *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1999), p. 217.

<sup>29</sup> To be sure, there is a rich tradition behind this sort of perception of the poetic language resident in the midst of the American poetic tradition itself. Spicer, as a California poet, necessarily evokes Robinson Jeffers's meditations on the inhumanity of the Californian shore at Carmel in Big Sur. Even more central and imminent is the presence of Emily Dickinson whose poems explored states of linguistic consciousness that tried to pierce

While this side of Spicer's poetics could easily be approached through reference to Spicer's debt to William Carlos Williams, or Robinson Jeffers (a paradigmatic California poet), Spicer's commentators often evoke ideas derived from Foucault, Heidegger, or Deleuze. Robin Blaser uses Foucault's ideas (from the philosopher's earlier period) of the obsolescence of the human and its dependence on the totality of language, thought of as a moving mass, a vast external labyrinthine element that annihilates individual subjectivity. "Foucault's thought meets mine," writes Blaser in the essay "The Practice of the Outside," an afterword to Spicer's collected works, "man is governed by 'labor, life and language'... and these are all of them also an 'exteriority' larger than any one man or many men, unmastered and unclosed."<sup>30</sup>

In a more recent reading, Geoffrey Hlibchuk sees what he calls Spicer's "topological" poetics as an important precursor of the post-modern deconstruction of the division between the inside and the outside of the human organism. What Spicer is said to sense is the melting of the human into the material worldliness of the world, as Heidegger would say. Hlibchuk reminds us that: "In Heidegger... the subject is melded with the environment to the point of inextricability."<sup>31</sup> This concept is then presented in the evolution it undergoes in J. Hillis Miller, the early Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. French thought takes the subject out of its well-delineated, corporeal separateness and seeks its porous

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through the limits of "life." Dickinson herself is part of another, greater tendency, found in American Romanticism referred to as American Orphic poetry. I believe, however, that the Orphic elements in American poetry must be kept separate from the influences of contemporary theory. As I argue below, Spicer's Orphicism has a Heideggerian hue in which the relations of life and death are in reversed ratio from its Emersonian variety.

<sup>30</sup> Robin Blaser, "The Practice of Outside," in: Jack Spicer, *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, p. 297.

<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Hlibchuk, "From Typology to Topology: on Jack Spicer," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Summer 2010), p. 335.

distributions over the environment. In Deleuze, subjectivity is transformed into a set of "intensities," which then "diffuse the subject and 'echo' it across the environment."<sup>32</sup> Spicer's "topology", with its Moebius Strip refusal of the inside/outside divide, provides ample evidence of this kind of operation, argues the critic.

The disappearance of the individual voice from the poems has its anti-ideological import. The role of the poet has become that of an investigator, a dismantler of ideologies. When Stephen Burt approaches the poetry of Rae Armantrout, one of the most successful poets emerging from the LANGUAGE movement, he connects her disjunctive form with the project of debunking capitalist ideologies. Armantrout's extreme formal care, with which she handles the most minute elements of poetic craft, becomes a device for the filtering out of fictions-spawning metaphors. However, as Burt notes, "even those perceptions become suspect for Armantrout... because they will always involve metaphor."<sup>33</sup> The result is poetry of total mistrust and suspicion, including the suspicion of language and poetry itself. Obviously, the language raised to such interrogating power will not bear any notion of the speaking subject. Burt again: "Armantrout has become the poet of our contemporary frustration with what we might call the social construction of everything. After Darwin, Freud, Gombrich, Derrida, Foucault, Bourdieu, Diebold ... we know how little we can be the authors of ourselves."<sup>34</sup>

When Armantrout herself comments on the lyric, she owns up to the influence of Stein, but places it in the context of the models of poetic language found in Jacques Lacan (through Julia Kristeva). Referring to an intense play of sound and sense introduced into American poetry by Stein, Armantrout speaks of the

repressed memory of the pre-linguistic, identified by Kristeva as the *chora*, which is now heard again in the way sound undermines sense. Armantrout writes: "when a poem's sound (the semiotic) begins to overtake its sense (the symbolic), we enter the territory of this infantile amnesia where the 'chora' once reigned."<sup>35</sup> On these views, poetic quality is found in the disruption of the dominant sense structures of everyday language, what Kristeva and Lacan would call "the symbolic," and the intrusion, or rather return, of the "semiotic" – a transgressive, and prelinguistic element.<sup>36</sup>

A poetics of the dissolution of individualized subjectivity is also developed by Susan Howe, another post-LANGUAGE poet. As one of the most acclaimed innovators of poetic forms, Howe has almost completely abandoned the idea of the personal poetic utterance coming out of an identified speaker. It is the stored corpora of language, the records, archives, material inscriptions that speak. The poet is merely a compiler of sources, a collagist of the existing traces of writing, and no specific language user is ever assumed.

As an archeologist of the material preservations of discourse, Howe makes us realize that no such compilation can ever be complete, just as no rationalized discourse can ever be closed. There are always the external contents, the bits and pieces of non-sense haunting the discourse from an unutterable outside. This clearly brings to mind the Derridean notion of the space

<sup>35</sup> Rae Armantrout, "The Lyric," in: *The Grand Piano: an Experiment in Collective Autobiography*, by Lyn Hejinian et al. (Detroit: Mode A, 2009), p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Julia Kristeva, Lacan's disciple, sees poetic language as a special case of the linguistic, a language that is different from the illusive and deceptive order of everyday codes in its capacity of breaking through it and reaching back to, or listening to the "pulsations" of, the Lacanian pre-linguistic, which Kristeva names the *chora*. It is the pre-linguistic infantile stage of the chaotic mix of life and death drives which remains in the backing of the linguistic, as the source of energy for the signifying process, a "precondition for creating the first measurable bodies." See Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf, 2009), p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

of writing, or inscription, as an element that reveals the absence – of the self, of the sense – much more than presence. History speaks to us, if at all, with an uncanny choir of all the voices repressed in the passage of time, in broken, staccato rhythms of disjunction and erasure. For Howe, history and self are, as for pragmatists, relational spaces, but her emphasis seems to be on the mysterious absence suffusing all relational systems. In her book, *Midnight*, she writes: “the relational space is alive with something from somewhere.”<sup>37</sup> As in Derrida, the relationality of the space of writing results in the thought of radical absence and otherness putting a check on any possibility of the stabilization of discourse. This is why Peter Nicholls, when commenting on Howe, quotes Derrida’s conceptualization of writing as the practice “focusing particularly on the material character of signification, which constantly threatens to undermine the ‘pure’ ideality of meaning.”<sup>38</sup> Such writing becomes “a place of unease,”<sup>39</sup> which prevents the work of mourning to be ever completed and keeps haunting our rationalizations with the plethora of those voices that were never firmly settled in them, the memory of which will in this way never be suppressed. The network of relations between the found materials dissolves the voice and pushes it into a precarious space between life and death. Next to writing as a relational space fueled by absence, there are frequent remarks and snapshots in Howe of older burial technologies: “In most towns in New York State there were no hearses until around 1830. The dead were borne on a shoulder bier sometimes for many miles.”<sup>40</sup> The death of the subject is here fully documented.

<sup>37</sup> Susan Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 2003), p. 58.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Nicholls, “Unsettling Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1996), p. 591.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 592.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Howe, *Frame Structures* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p. 6.

### The Neo-Pragmatist Correction of the Material Deconstruction of Individual Subjectivity.

What becomes apparent in the juncture of the theory and practice of the poets and writers associated with the LANGUAGE group is a characteristic and rich theoretical-practical convergence of themes and concepts. Coming together in this cluster are motifs which find their source in the past of American poetry and others that can be traced to continental theory. Taking a lesson from American poetic predecessors, such poets as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and the objectivists, their LANGUAGE and post-LANGUAGE heirs have learned to attend to the material actuality and texture of their medium, and to see the advantage of admitting and exposing the artifice of poetic form. These strategies contribute to the idea of poetry as a tool of increased self-awareness, allowing for the interrogation and criticism of ideology in disguise of naturally accepted values.

On the other hand, the kind of inflation of the role of language as an autonomous medium that the LANGUAGE poets espouse and profess is additionally attended to, explicated, reinforced, and justified with ideas derived from French, post-Heideggerian post-structuralism. In this family of views, language is an uncanny space of the dissolution of the individual subject, either annihilating it, or forcing it to seek the true sources of life beyond itself (in *jouissance*, or silence). As we have seen, Kristeva’s notion of the poetic demands that poets seek in radical, syntactic disjunction the transgressive and anarchic contact with the area of the pre-linguistic. In Lacan, Kristeva’s teacher, the subject-formation in the language is inextricable from the subject’s acquiescence and acceptance of its own mortality as the ultimate reality of existence.<sup>41</sup> In

<sup>41</sup> Language mortifies the subject in Lacan. *Jouissance* is beyond it, or before it, before the birth into the realm of symbols. Paradoxically, life is in the death of the subject. At one moment Lacan writes: “when we wish to attain in



Heidegger and the early Foucault, language is a space of necessity that overwhelms and cancels the individual.<sup>42</sup> Finally, in Derrida and his followers, language proliferates only to testify to the impossibility of any meaning formation, and any ego-formation, gesturing beyond itself, either toward silence or toward a plethora of noises that haunt all discourse and all narration as their repressed other.<sup>43</sup>

The theoretical convergence outlined above can be provisionally named the poetics of the material deconstruction of individual subjectivity. Its common denominator is the decisive banishing of the idea of poetry as a space of the expression, or presence, or even formation, of individual subjectivity. Language, in its materiality, often merging with the recaptured materiality of the world, is thought to destroy such

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the subject what was before the serial articulations of speech, and what is primordial to the birth of symbols, we find it in death, from which his existence takes all the meaning it has." Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 104-5.

<sup>42</sup> The Heideggerian merger of the linguistic faculty and the experience of death is well-known. In recent theory it was perhaps most forcibly argued by Giorgio Agamben who reminds us of Heidegger's "essential relation between language and death," in which "language is the voice and memory of death." See Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: the Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xi, 46. As for Foucault, at least in his early development, it is language, as a Dionisiac labyrinth erasing the individual, that represents the realm of death and authenticity. In his early book on Raymond Roussel, whose uncanny poetry of radical impersonality and proceduralism, anticipates the experiment of the Oulipo group, Foucault wrote that it makes us "confront the unbearable evidence that language comes to us from the depth of the perfectly clear night, and is impossible to master." See Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*, trans. Charles Ruas (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> In an as yet unpublished paper, presented at a conference "Theory That Matters: What Practice After Theory" in Łódź, in April 2010, Tadeusz Ślawek, a leading Polish authority on Derrida, states: "long pages of Derrida's work are, paradoxically, trying to reach and perhaps name the essential silence: the speaker has been speaking for so long and with such a strain and scream that his voice has gotten husky."

subjectivity, prevent its formation, and expose it as one of the illusions of an outdated, ideologically suspect humanism.

What pragmatism and neo-pragmatism have to offer the discussion of American poetry is a correction of the poetics of material deconstruction. The pragmatist views on language, the relation between language and physical matter, between language and corporeality, communication, the individuality of the work of art, suggest that we can easily have a humanity without essence, which does not mutilate the world of things by its mere presence among them, but brings this world into existence, and that we can also have embodied, individual subjectivity without detrimental ideological blindness. Even more, pragmatism suggests that, in the arts, we actually always do have those qualities, and that their compulsive avoidance may be a kind of ideological overwriting itself. While it is naïve to expect poetry to be a place where subjectivities receive an "expression," poetry, being a special state of language, necessarily carrying network combinations of human stances, will see the ongoing emergence of subjectivities. In the remaining section of this essay, I am going to outline the neo-pragmatist position on language, aesthetics, the idea of self-formation through entering the poetic process, and the ironies attendant on this act.

Let us start with language itself. In pragmatism, language is not a space external to and inimical to individual subjectivity, but a tool of inter-subjective communication inseparable from the emergence of subjects. Language is the result of human plurality and sociality. The need of communication is primary and precedes, conditions, without incapacitating, the processes of self-formation: the human comes into being through the presence of other humans and communication with them. Already in Dewey, it is the need of communication that makes language a part of the world, but not in the sense of a thing having an essence, but as an operating human faculty that allows

humans to change inchoate external impulses into the things we know. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey wrote: "that things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man... that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales."<sup>44</sup> Individuals and inanimate things exist because of the medium of communication. Dewey again: "Where communication exists things in acquiring meaning thereby acquire representatives, signs and implicates, which are infinitely more amenable ... more permanent and more accommodating, than events in their first estate."<sup>45</sup> The "first estate" is out there, but it is not a locus of any meaning that could or should be recuperated. There is no pre-linguistic (Lacan, Kristeva) or extra-linguistic (Derrida) *jouissance*, which should be accessed for the rejuvenation of the linguistic. No extra-linguistic realm dictates anything, or determines the ensuing movement of signification and communication.

It is the process of communication and the emerging signification that constitutes *all* of the environment, with all of its energy. Thus, when Donald Davidson opens his book on "truth and predication," *truth* appears not so much a result of the accurate aligning of signs with any world outside the signs, any "first estate," but rather the condition and environment in which signification may occur at all, a force field that keeps the interlocutors in play as agents responsible for the play. It is they who speak, not the "world," not "things in themselves" in their stipulated freedom from the human regime. "Truth" and significance, the life and death of signs, happen in the area of human discourse, are thoroughly human phenomena, and belong in everyday, normal situations. Davidson continues: "the problem the pragmatists were addressing – the problem of how to relate the truth to human desire, beliefs, intentions...

<sup>44</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court, 1929), p. 138.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138-9.

seems to me the right one to concentrate on in the thinking about truth,"<sup>46</sup> and he connects Dewey with Rorty: "Rorty captures Dewey's intention of removing truth from a realm so exalted only philosophers could hope to attain."<sup>47</sup> For Davidson, human beliefs, desires (and thus pleasures), in fact all of human psychological life, have their life in and through the space of linguistic exchange, truth being the name of the human commitment to this space, not the name of the accuracy of representation. There is no sign exchange that can be called language if it does not carry with it the networks of human stances and attitudes.

Rorty and Davidson disagree on the ultimate interest, import, and value of the term "truth," but they share the Deweyan view according to which all interest, meaning, and import reside in the vicissitudes of the communication process. The central premise of Rortyan philosophy can be found in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, in a fragment which succinctly summarizes the argument of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: "Truth cannot be out there, because sentences cannot so exist... The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not."<sup>48</sup> In Dewey, Davidson, and in Rorty, the world does not speak, and the notion that there is an independent entity called "nature" suffering the regime of human notions becomes unintelligible. The world outside the human does not offer any system of signification; whatever it comes to "signify," emanates from the human element.

The world is lost in this discourse, "well-lost," as Rorty put it in one of his essays, but the loss applies only to the non-human world: what is lost, or eliminated, is the idea that the non-human offers any instruction for the human. In fact, the world in the neo-pragmatist

<sup>46</sup> Donald Davidson, *Truth and Predication* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 5.

discourse is regained, and it is regained on new rights and new conditions. As Rorty argues convincingly in “The World Well-Lost,” drawing largely on Davidson’s refutation of the scheme-content distinction, the world is always with us. As long as we speak, as long as we maintain the communication process going and our commitment to it fresh, we maintain and preserve the world and are in touch with it. There is no gap between human language and things. By speaking, we remain related to the world. It is the human discourse that is the world.<sup>49</sup> With the pragmatist take on language, we see that the radical other of “death,” found in the area of language by Heidegger, Agamben, Lacan, or by the early Foucault, or the “life” of inanimate matter, the “things themselves,” can only be figures for the further proliferation of discourse, the further life of the organism’s linguistic activity, the further self-creation and proliferation of the human capacity for wanting new shapes for its world.

This understanding of language and communication has tremendous consequences for our understanding of what the literary language may be. First, to say that we are in touch with the world all the time, as Rorty and Davidson say, is to remove the burden of representation from among the tasks of language. What it also means, however, is that we have no recourse to the drama of the human as a filter disturbing either the great Non-Being of the universe of death or the life of things. Secondly, the deconstructive notion that literature, as a richly self-annihilating play of language, is the highest consciousness of the dissolution of meaning under the pressure of this extra-linguistic “outside” has no footing after the lesson of neo-pragmatism.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Richard Rorty, “The World Well-Lost,” in: *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Such is the idea of literature coming out of the books of Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller. Their approach uses a distinction between the less self-aware, empirical languages of the everyday, and the more insightful and self-aware languages of literature, that testify, in a kind

The first consequence will shed light on the relation of the human and the world of objects, and I will return to it below. The second consequence changes our understanding of the status of literary discourse. There is no radical break between the languages of everyday discourse and literary languages. There is only a shift in the environment and context of the communication – in its urgency. In everyday discourse, determined by all kinds of economic rules, for example Grice’s conversational maxims, or Davidson’s “charity,” there is a high degree of urgency, which curbs the indeterminacy inherent in all linguistic exchange and pushes toward limited communicative goals. In the non-everyday, or, say, “literary” communication, such urgency is removed. This, however, does not – cannot – mean the removal of the linguistic or a breaking through, by means of fragmented syntax, dissected word formation, or “pure materiality of the letter,” to the “other side” of language, the “pre-linguistic” in any of its numerous theoretical guises. The literary, or the poetic, is still linguistic, unless we want to speak of other aesthetic disciplines, such as music or visual arts (whatever is meant, for instance, by the “pure materiality of the letter” must be either picture or music – not language). The removal of the urgency governing everyday conversation does not mean abandoning the realm of language as a tool that was honed in the conversational and communicative contexts. The aesthetic language of literature is not radically different from the language of everyday conversation, since, as it is clear in Dewey and Davidson, the latter are already indebted to the aesthetic. The difference is in degree, not in kind. To enter the poetic means to intensify the experimental search for new possibilities, the search that is already present in everyday exchanges, where, however, it must give way to the principle of communicative urgency. In the poetic, the ordinary communicative ploys are free to strike a new pose.

of negative transcendence, to the basic impossibility of meaning.

Furthermore, in the pragmatist perspective, the life of desire and of the human psyche is linguistic, and it contains its otherness inside the ongoing communicative process. There is no danger that in such life the heterogeneity of desire, which the cluster of views I called material deconstruction stipulates to be found “outside” of language, will be sterilized by the homogenizing tendencies of the linguistic subject. As Davidson showed in his discussions of malapropisms, an ordinary conversation already confronts the subject with otherness; otherness inheres in every ordinary linguistic situation in which individual idioms collide and exceed the platform of language as a rule-governed whole.<sup>51</sup> It is in this Davidsonian contribution to the linguistic thought of Dewey and Rorty that we may correct the view that “language speaks man.” From the fact that the linguistic inventories are bigger and wider than any single linguistic situation cannot be inferred that it determines the rich network of collisions and distortions that will occur in every linguistic situation. Neo-pragmatism reverses the relation: it is humans, in their interactions that have a chance of rewriting linguistic maps. What speaks are humans in particular situations, and the literary is an enhancement and an exposure of this capacity.

The accelerated immersion in linguistic encounters, which is the proper function of the poetic, reformulates desire and absorbs it into the whole life of the self. Inasmuch as desire takes on significance, it is inextricably

linked to articulation, not separate from it. This is the lesson that Alexander Nehamas draws from Rorty’s scattered remarks on self-creation through the writing and reading process. Beauty is a spur of creation, but is also a spur to indefatigable pursuit of beauty and desire that happens in and through the process of interpretation.<sup>52</sup>

The interpretive work is present at all levels of reality. Not even the everyday appearances of things are free from such networks. What we take to be the everyday appearance is just the absence of the need to reinterpret. Nehamas writes: “what counts as observation, as W.V. Quine insisted, is what the members of a particular group with similar background will agree to immediately, when presented with the same phenomenon.”<sup>53</sup> Necessarily, however, such agreements are always dynamic. They change and, with them, changes the appearance of things. Interpretation enters, and “since each thing resembles and differs from infinitely many others, the process can go on forever.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, it is even at the level of the everyday ordinariness that interpretations are present, as stabilized conventions. Aesthetic or artistic action starts when these interpretations cease to be latent. The artistic lies in the open acceleration of the work of interpretation and re-interpretation, in immersing the object in newer networks of connections and contexts (Rorty called this operation recontextualization). Nehamas again: “Nothing is what it is independently of anything else; no

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<sup>51</sup> I am referring to Davidson’s model of communication, developed in the paper “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” which demands from all involved interlocutors an ongoing readjustment of their linguistic assumptions and skills. On the view that I am proposing here, although the produced modifications of the interlocutors’ linguistic inventories (their “prior theories”) continue to conform to general semantic rules, they also put pressure on those rules and thus modify convention and the linguistic network of the self. For Davidson’s paper, see *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford New York: Basil Blackwell 1986), pp. 433-446.

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<sup>52</sup> Nehamas’s interpretation of the function of beauty in creation departs from the Shopenhauerian gesture in which the artist creates in order to cease to want and get out of the trap of the ever-unfulfilled desire. Against this picture, Nehamas develops a combination of Plato and Nietzsche. Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 131-133.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

moment, no person, no thing has a meaning in and of itself.”<sup>55</sup>

In Nehamas we see the full realization of the consequence of pragmatist linguistics for the relations of the human with the so called realm of matter and objects. In the pragmatist view, there is no place for what Gerald Bruns is looking for in his promotion of materialist poetics, or for Hejninian’s idea active in material deconstruction, according to which “the materials of nature speak.” The search for the realm of things free from the regime of the human, or the idea of respecting the world of things on its own, becomes indefensible. The best poems of those poets who, like Ponge, or like William Carlos Williams, deal with objects, do not free their so far suppressed or ideologically distorted *nature*, but raise them into the realm of human potentiality. It is the neo-pragmatist approach that corrects our stance toward objects: shame is in place when there is a shortage of human imaginativeness, not when there is an excess of the human. Interpretation, as something inescapable, can be enslaving or liberating. It is enslaving when its presence is denied; liberating, when admitted and attended to. Art offers the latter option, by taking special care, or activating, the work of interpretation arrested by custom. When Francis Ponge confesses that “I have chosen things, objects, so that I would always have a break on my subjectivity, calling back the object as it exists when I write about it,”<sup>56</sup> he is mistaking excellent interpretive work, of the kind that is found in his own poems, for lack of interpretation and “objectivity.” No object was ever seen by anybody the way he sees them in his poems. The gain in seeing, obviously sharable, is subjective in the sense of emerging through a uniquely focused artistic attention.

It is also through and in this ongoing, never ending, driven-by-the-desire-for-beauty, interpretive pursuit that our being in constant touch with the world comes to

open our self-creative touch with ourselves. The joint perspectives of Rorty and Nehamas make inescapable not only the fact that all ordinariness is already an interpretation, but also the fact that the interpretation performed in the service of the pursuit of desire and beauty is the work of self-creation. This mechanism is already seen in the Davidsonian notion of the communicative situation: it will put relocative pressure on the linguistic networks of the self. Similarly, in Rorty and in Nehamas, all interpretation is a relocation of the values of the existing relational network, which, however, are never freely floating, impersonal entities. The relational networks of beliefs, desires, and values, are parts of living selves, and as they are transformed, so are the selves. Art and the poetic, again, are a self-aware entry into the process, and the famed death of the author is a fable. For Rorty, self-creation is an inescapable result of severing all inquiry from the task of representation. Inquiry as recontextualization necessarily beams back on the inquirer. The reading and writing processes are a special kind of recontextualization, one that proceeds without the clear goals set by the inquiry of normal science. But the removal of clearly set goals does nothing to the processes of self-creation. On the contrary, as the literary process proceeds, the self comes into contact with an array of its possible new configurations that is simply vaster than the shapes the self takes in its everyday interactions.<sup>57</sup>

Nehamas continues these motifs in Rorty, and refocuses them on self-creation through the artistic. In the arts,

<sup>57</sup> I am drawing of course on a large area of Rorty’s views and writings. Perhaps there are some more definite points on this map that I could refer my readers to. For example, I think there is a consistent line that leads from texts like “Inquiry as Recontextualization” (in: *Objectivity, Relativity, and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) to, say, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” (in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) to “Redemption from Egotism” (in: *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Christopher Voparil and Richard Bernstein, Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>56</sup> Bruns, *The Material of Poetry*, p. 87.

the prolonged contact with works of art instigates interpretive processes that will affect the self. The work of art comes into being as a special, unique arrangement of motifs and elements. All such arrangement "constitutes an individual."<sup>58</sup> Works of art, those that are created or those that are only interpreted, become integral parts of human lives: "beautiful things interpose themselves between me and what I already want. They give me new things to desire."<sup>59</sup> The subject does not die in the creative processes; on the contrary, the subject is born in them. Nehamas points out that Foucault's criticism of the notion of the author works with a narrow concept of the author as a mental state that precedes the work of art and can then be treated as a reference template for interpretation. The moment we realize that creation is an active participation in the network, we will realize that no such activity is harmless, leaving the subject untouched and unchanged. The work itself will appear as a source or hypothesis of individualized subjectivity, gaining its shape, however temporary, inside the work: "the author emerges as the agent postulated in order to account for construing a text as the product of an action."<sup>60</sup> Authors and subjectivity are products of literary works, and authors are the future, not the past, of texts.

Finally, in the family of neo-pragmatist approaches, the linguisticism of Rorty and the aestheticism of Nehamas are complemented by the work of Richard Shusterman. His writings provide ample argument for the idea that while the interpretive work of self-creation is done in and through language, it is not done through language as a disembodied abstraction. It is true, of course, that there are deep differences between the radical linguisticism of Rorty and Shusterman's someaesthetics, but these differences cannot be dealt with here for the

lack of space. I would like to note at this point, however, that the work of many major American poets involved the move of combining states of the psyche and cognition with states of the bodily. The obvious example here is Whitman for whom writing was impossible without including forms of somatic awareness. This awareness is present in Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara, and many other American poets.<sup>61</sup> Poetry then becomes a space in which language and the bodily cease to exist in the manner of precedence. Rather than one being a reflection or product of the other, they achieve in poems more reciprocal, mutually nourishing modes of being. There are kinds of language in major poetry that would never occur if they were not issued by organisms that are simultaneously linguistic and embodied.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, because of the heightened reciprocity of the language of a large number of major poets and the somatic states registered by this language, I think Shusterman makes an important point, which is a necessary complementation of Rorty's insistence that all awareness is linguistic. Without solving this philosophical difference and going for or against the claim that *all* awareness is linguistic, I only wish to point out that the consciousness produced by vast corpora of poetry is both linguistic and somatic.<sup>63</sup> This fact speaks for

<sup>58</sup> Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, p. 133.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Nehamas, "Writer, Text, Work, Author," in: *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 281.

<sup>61</sup> It is very interesting to note that even as cerebral and cold a poet as Wallace Stevens proves, on closer reading, to be drawing on the somatic awareness of bodily states. Stevens's formal discipline and his lexical extravagance coexist, render, respond to, alternately cause and reflect, the somatic states of strong but deeply restrained pleasures.

<sup>62</sup> Creeley's meticulous portraits of the material space surrounding his speakers implies his heightened sensitivity to his corporeal conditions; O'Hara's urban topographies would be incomplete without the language of his poems carrying with them the record of the bodily states of pleasure or fatigue.

<sup>63</sup> I am aware, of course, that Shusterman's position is more radical than mine. My reading of poetry makes me think that the linguistic and the bodily go hand in hand, nourish and enrich one another, ultimately producing states of being in which the difference between them ceases to exist. I think that Shusterman, on the other



Shusterman's central argument, which highlights somatic mindfulness as a form of subjectivity that is fuller, wider, and more capacious than merely the cerebrally understood linguisticity. This argument speaks against "ignore[ing] the body's subject-role as the living locus of beautiful, personal experience"; it "refuses to exteriorize the body as an alienated thing distinct from the active spirit of human experience."<sup>64</sup> The increased somatic mindfulness – whether catalyzed by language or catalyzing new linguistic formations – is definitely present in the kind of subjectivity that is emergent in complex poetic texts.

With this neo-pragmatist contribution in mind, however, we can return to one of the ideas of radical otherness and verify the ideas of those critics who, like Bruns, would like to see the body turned into "flesh" or a "body without organs" and purified of singular identity. Bruns's argument in *Ceasing to be Human* is that the decision of entering the kind of animal state that will ultimately change the controllable "body" into a bare life of flesh can produce a form of life that is interesting from the communicative and political point of view.<sup>65</sup>

The neo-pragmatist perspective makes these approaches much less interesting and debunks them as remnants of the metaphysics of the great "outside." The work of Shusterman makes it clear that the fact that the bodily is a potential for enlarging the scope of subjectivity, against the Cartesian tradition, should not be taken as an argument for pushing the bodily into the muteness and speechlessness of featureless generality. On the contrary, Shusterman shows that the recuperation of the

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hand, would rather insist that important areas of the somatic experience are just non-linguistic. In *Practicing Philosophy*, for example, he mentions "a more controversial dimension of bodily experience, a quality of somatic feeling that lies beneath linguistic formulation and often resists it." See his *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 31.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 274.

<sup>65</sup> Bruns, *On Ceasing*, p. 67-74.

bodily sphere from the objectifying tendencies of the Cartesian heritage involves commerce between the bodily and forms of attention and thus articulateness. The bodily is freed into a form of subjectivity when it is attended to through states of somatic mindfulness, which, in my view at least, do not quarrel with greater articulateness.

The resulting inclusion of the bodily in the life of subjectivity is inseparable from the greater individuation and internal differentiation of the bodily features. Within Shusterman's somatic mindfulness, the body itself becomes more articulate, both capable of articulation, and requiring or influencing greater efforts at articulation. While Bruns's "bare body" is advertised as a form of life, it is in fact a form of blandness, personal and political disappearance. In the picture proposed by Shusterman, the body is beginning to signify more, aesthetically and politically, when the organism is capable of far deeper interpretive and differentiating contact with its somatic sphere. It is when more of the bodily can be felt, sensed, named, communicated with, accessed by language, by instruction, or by somatic or aesthetic action, that the subject has a bigger chance of politically aware relation with one's surroundings.

### Conclusions: the Poetic Strangeness of Pragmatism and the Poetics of Emergent Selves.

Pragmatism is a difficult position. Its rejection of metaphysics is far more radical and insistent than in the case of other philosophical styles. Neo-pragmatism reinforces, indeed radicalizes, classical pragmatism's message of the central and inescapable position of the human element. It is the human, with its meaning making and interpretive potential, that is the sole source of what we call the world. The only "outside" is in the future shapes that the human selves can take, the newly emergent shapes of the selves.

In the work of Rorty, Davidson, Nehamas, and Shusterman, meaning, language, desire and beauty (or ugliness) are human states. What I called here the convergence of material deconstruction does not so much escape the human, as it tries to explain it either as a being that is endlessly dependent on the necessity of biological death, or a being that is determined by the “materiality of language.” In this picture, the human is explained as an accident of dead matter or as an emanation of language. The radical post-humanist irony of the new pragmatism resides in the fact that here, for once, there is a firm refusal to reach for any such explanation of the human. The neo-pragmatist humanity, understood non-essentially as a potentiality for new shapes of both singular subjectivities and their communities, is not to be explained as an accidental error of the absolute emptiness or a terminal of a linguistic network. Biological death is a fact of life, not the other way round, and language is not a space nurturing the work of active negativity, but a non-essential medium of looking for the future shapes of human selves. Rather than being an external element, language is an integral part of each self.

As such, however, the human is also infinitely strange. To refuse to justify human activity through backing it up by appeal to some sort of externality is to see humanity as permanently unexplained – thus strange. The lesson of the new-pragmatism is that there is no final knowledge of what the human may be, or what it may become. Consequently, no shape attained by the human is stable and making and unmaking are constant and inseparable elements of human reality. To say that is to enter the mode of active pragmatist irony. Unlike the absolute irony of deconstruction, pragmatist irony merely stipulates that in imaginative writing reinterpretations are constantly at work, and where this happens there appear new shapes of selves. Pragmatist irony enters when we know that we will be different; ironical self-creation happens when we start participating actively in the change.

Contemporary poetry, with its unchecked experimental impulse, is certainly a place where such participation occurs. With no support in the absolutist thought of death in language, it does not revert the selves to the non-being of dead materiality; rather, it makes the radically ironic move of pushing selves on course toward their new shapes. Also, language, although it is never entirely the speaker’s possession, bringing with it intrusive, inauthentic, ideologically contaminated constructions, is not entirely alienated from the self or the self from it. With Rorty and Davidson it is more proper to say that one can oppose the received languages. This opposition, so often registered in contemporary American poetry, will result in new specific linguistic positions: there will be more language and thus more newly evolved subjective positions. These positions will imply specific states of interaction with the world that are both linguistic and somatic (embodied). Thus the transformations that affect the self will have lasting consequences in the outside world. Neo-pragmatism does more than repeat the idea of the transitive character of all achieved linguistic states: it is also a reminder that, despite their transitivity, these states will affect the world. The neo-pragmatist poetics of the evolving self is then a platform for political stances, more feasible than the aesthetics of endless dissolution.

To sense one’s self evolving through active linguistic/poetic activities and to consciously choose this state, is to enter ironic self-creation. It is this ironic self-creation that is the consequence of the combined stance of Rorty, Davidson, Nehamas, and Shusterman. However, to enter the process and space of ironic self-creation is also to feel the strangeness of self-transformation. The state of death-in-life – a dispersion of the central Cartesian subjectivity – sensed by some of the major American poets, from Whitman, through Stevens, to the poets of contemporary disjunctiveness (such as the poets I mentioned in this essay) should be reinterpreted away from the ideas of the self’s erasure

under the larger presence of the mass of impersonal language, or the self's submission to the truth of the material world, and brought closer to the family of ideas speaking of the emergence of new selves. Each entry into the space of increased linguistic play creates a relocation and a trembling in the linguistic and somatic states of the self. The new selves, as they are glimpsed emerging in the poems, create tension between the biographical self of the writer and the text. What some poets have provisionally identified as the state of a poetic "death" can now, with the neo-pragmatist contribution, be reinterpreted as the experience of this kind of tension and dispersal. But it is not the realm of death that is so experienced – there is no play of meanings, no states of connective networks, in death.

Rather this experience is the experience of ironic self-creation: of one's own self getting destabilized in the confrontation of its new emergent selves. I think that what happens in the poetry of Howe, Armantrout, or Peter Gizzi (a continuator Spicer's legacy) and many other formally innovative American poets, is the encounter of this experience. What criticism has failed to do so far is to offer language in which poets could see their practice not so much as an obliteration of their individual subjectivity but a space of its reconfiguration. New-pragmatism provides a vital, much needed impulse toward such a reinterpretation.

For the last three decades the new pragmatism in American literary studies has been commonly associated with several prominent critics including Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, Stanley Fish, Steven Mailloux, Giles Gunn, and Richard Poirier. From a neighboring discipline, such philosophers as Richard Rorty, by claiming that philosophy and literature do not differ in essence, have offered literary scholars vigorous encouragement to draw on the pragmatist heritage.<sup>1</sup> And yet many of those who have been recognized as leading literary neo-pragmatists<sup>2</sup> – such as Walter Benn Michaels and Stanley Fish – remain silent about their actual attitude to philosophical pragmatism and deny their own writings any substantial consequences.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty emphasizes the parallels between philosophy and literature in many of his writings. One of the most interesting discussions of those parallels is to be found in an interview which he gave to E. P. Ragg in 2002. See Richard Rorty, with E. P. Ragg, "Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 26 (2002), pp. 369-396. Elsewhere, Rorty goes so far as to claim that philosophy is in fact a literary genre. See Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre," in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics. Philosophical Papers, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> The first book-length publication which announced the emergence of neo-pragmatism in literary studies was *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) edited by W. J. T. Mitchell. This collection of essays includes "Against Theory" by Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp as well as critical responses to their seminal text followed by Michaels and Knapp's rejoinders.

<sup>3</sup> This is best exemplified by Stanley Fish's essay entitled "Consequences," in which he argues that his (and anyone else's) views on theory entail no practical consequences whatsoever. See Stanley Fish, "Consequences," in: Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 315-341. I take issue with

Interestingly, even "Against Theory" by Michaels and Knapp, the pioneering text of literary neo-pragmatism, which came to be identified as a manifesto of the movement, seems to owe very little to the most influential pragmatist thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its central point – that interpretation of literature need not (and should not) rely on a prescriptive theory of any sort – is empiricist through and through, and as such it draws on an epistemological position which considerably predates the emergence of pragmatism. In fact, the closest Knapp and Michaels get to aligning their perspective with philosophical pragmatism is when they refuse to separate knowledge from true belief; however, at no point are they prepared to acknowledge that their argument is informed by the views expounded in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce or William James. Therefore, "Against Theory" may be described as anti-theoretical, but not necessarily as pragmatist. Whether it is genuinely pragmatic<sup>4</sup> also remains an open question.

Gerald Graff's works belong to a different category. Although like his close friend, Stanley Fish, Graff has never declared himself to be a pragmatist, on closer inspection most of his writings on literature and liberal education, unlike Fish's, reveal both pragmatist inspirations and far-reaching pragmatic ramifications.

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Fish's position in *Disciplining the New Pragmatism: Theory, Rhetoric, and the Ends of Literary Study* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Wien: Peter Lang, 2006), especially pp. 129-135.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this essay I maintain a distinction between the two adjectives – pragmatist and pragmatic – even though they are both semantically related to pragmatism (from Gr. *pragma*: action, a deed, an affair) and may be treated synonymously in another context. I use 'pragmatist' to refer to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophical tradition, which is either explicitly or implicitly invoked in some contemporary writings, while 'pragmatic' implies practice, action, and a matter-of-fact, forward-looking attitude characteristic of those who seek to transform their immediate environment. In the case of most of the literary and educational criticism I discuss here, 'pragmatic' (or 'neo-pragmatist') seems to be a more adequate qualification of its practice-oriented, empirical thrust. Accordingly, I reserve 'pragmatist' for a possible description of its philosophical provenance.

Therefore I find it somewhat surprising that so far Graff has not been included in the ranks of the most prominent neo-pragmatists either by his adversaries or by his supporters. My claim is that the majority of Graff's works do deserve the label of pragmatism, perhaps even more so than most of the texts produced by the card-carrying neo-pragmatists. Not only does his position on pedagogy emerge as a creative and intelligent interpretation of John Dewey's views presented, *inter alia*, in *Democracy and Education* but also, perhaps more importantly, Graff's contributions are predominantly practical, rather than theoretical. They shy away from purely philosophical speculation and are meant to make a real difference, at least within the academic world. Consequently, as I argue here, even though there are few direct references to Dewey's corpus in Graff's works,<sup>5</sup> it is still possible to read his markedly non-philosophical writings as contextualized applications of Dewey's general views on progressive education.

One of the most significant pragmatist tenets which Graff subscribes to involves the notions of knowledge and communication. For Dewey knowledge is not a matter of a faithful representation of some external reality but a mode of social practice which crucially depends on interaction with other human beings and our environment: "If the living, experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective."<sup>6</sup> If the acquisition of knowledge involves participation, then the essence of education lies in developing communication skills. Consequently, as Gert Biesta has it, Dewey's theory of education is a theory of

communication.<sup>7</sup> In the context of contemporary academia, this translates into Graff's contention that we live in an argument culture and the mission of the university should be to prepare its students for participation in public life. More specifically, by exposing them to intellectual conflicts, educators should develop their students' critical and argumentative skills. That imperative underlies Graff's model of 'teaching the conflicts,' which I discuss at length further on in this essay.

Another crucial issue raised in *Democracy and Education* concerns the status of the student. Unlike many traditional pedagogical approaches which conceive of the student as the *object* of educational efforts on the part of the teacher, Dewey's progressive position may be described as learner-oriented. His notion of the process of education, which, as I have already indicated, relies on participation, communication and mutual engagement of both parties (i.e., the student and the teacher), precludes the possibility of forcing anything upon or into the learner because, by doing so, the teacher may "distort and pervert human nature."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, according to Dewey's commentators, "[s]tudents as intentional, independently capable, autonomy-deserving persons are at the core of [his] work."<sup>9</sup> Among Graff's recent writings, *Clueless in Academe* is a very eloquent reminder of how important it is to take the student's perspective into account in humanities education. What is particularly valuable about Graff's work (and, at the same time, emblematic of his pragmatism) is that he addresses the most burning questions in the contemporary academy by looking at the effectiveness of university education from the point

<sup>5</sup> In my view, Graff's arguments do not necessarily require a philosophical validation to be effective. It is not his priority to make them appear philosophically sound; what matters is that his writings successfully address the key dilemmas connected with the tasks and functions of the contemporary humanities.

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (A Penn State Electronic Series Classics Publication, 2001), p. 345.

<sup>7</sup> See Gert Biesta, "'Of All Affairs, Communication Is the Most Wonderful': The Communicative Turn in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*," in: *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect: A Critical Engagement With Dewey's Democracy and Education*, ed. David T. Hansen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> Gary D. Fenstermacher, "Rediscovering the Student in *Democracy and Education*," in: *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect*, p. 97.

of view of 'a generic alienated student.'<sup>10</sup> He invariably analyzes those questions (which I discuss at length in Sections II and III) with a view to eliminating misunderstandings and unnecessary complications. Moreover, Graff's writings envisage a future in which a reformed and improved humanities education will realize its potential to make students' and teachers' academic experience meaningful and satisfying.

Graff's pragmatism is also reflected in his choice of the epigraph for *Literature Against Itself*, the first major statement of his position on literature and its functions. By adopting Lionel Trilling's observation ("I think this is the great sin of the intellectual: that he never really tests his ideas by what it would mean to him if he were to undergo the experience that he is recommending"<sup>11</sup>), Graff stresses the necessity of correlating intellectual reflection with practice. I highlight the correlation throughout this essay; however, I begin with Graff's general views on literary studies and education at large, and it is not until I reach Section II that I focus on more detailed academic issues that he considers particularly urgent. Finally, Section III is concerned with Graff's constructive suggestions and solutions, which he proffers in the hope of finding answers to some of the crucial problems of the humanities education and research, including those which currently beset literary studies.

# I

Graff's status in the academy can hardly be described as that of a theorist of literature, culture or education, although in his writings there are numerous passages which explicitly address theoretical, philosophical and social issues. Still, their thrust is usually subordinated to a practice-oriented agenda. The presence of ideological

and methodological statements in his books varies considerably, his early publications being more consistently programmatic in this respect. Published in 1979, *Literature Against Itself* is definitely a case in point. There, Graff engages in polemical discussions with poststructuralism, New Criticism and a score of other positions that deny literature's entanglement in history, politics, and social conditions which have inspired it and affected its shape and message. In that polemic, he elaborates a critique which obliges him to clearly define his own perspective. This is not to say that in his later writings he avoids identifying his stance on many key theoretical questions. Most of those, however, occur in specific contexts, in discussions which are not primarily intended as contributions to the broadly defined discourse of theory.

What follows in this section is an overview of Graff's chief assumptions about literary studies, cultural studies, education, intellectualism, and democracy. The very fact that those assumptions are less and less forcefully articulated in his recent books is testimony to their non-dogmatic quality and Graff's open-mindedness about various views and critical positions. This is illustrated by a telling passage in the introduction to his 1992 book, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. There, he acknowledges that in *Literature Against Itself* he underappreciated the value of the views he was attacking and acknowledges that by studying them closely he has learnt more from his adversaries than from his allies. Thereby, he issues a warning against "clos[ing] ourselves off from new ways of thinking."<sup>12</sup> When critics of his writings find fault with Graff's apparent inconsistencies over the course of his long and

<sup>10</sup> See Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 130-131.

<sup>11</sup> See Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. viii. From the vantage point of the present, it seems surprising that in the early 1990's Graff should have been accused of being doctrinaire – see Harold Fromm, "Establishing A Way in a World of Conflicts," in: *Teaching the Conflicts: Gerald Graff, Curricular Reform, and the Culture Wars*, ed. William E. Cain (New York and London: Garland, 1994), p. 72.



eventful academic career, they miss a crucial point about its value. Namely, it has never been his intention to develop a new comprehensive system; rather, his avowed aim has always been to contribute to improving the *status quo* by ameliorating the effects of current educational practices.

At the very outset of Chapter One of *Literature Against Itself* Graff explicitly declares his assumptions about literature and its scope, his position being clearly antagonistic to all sorts of formalist approaches. In a particularly plain and articulate manner which will come to define his rhetoric in later writings, he opens his discussion of cultural and literary issues with an explicit announcement of what his book is going to be about and what he is going to argue in it. He declares his interest in how "both literature and our ways of talking about it have been conditioned by social pressures and how they have in turn influenced social life."<sup>13</sup> Against the arrogations of latter-day aestheticists who want to detach the fine arts from their historical and political contexts, Graff maintains that "[m]ost theories of the nature of literature are more or less concealed theories of the nature of man and of the good society."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, he ascribes an instrumental function to literature and its discussions; literature is defined by its relevance to, and influence on, moral and social questions. In other words, talking about literature should not be an end in itself, but a means to an end. And the end is firmly embedded in our reality, in the daily human transactions which, once inspired by literary themes and patterns, stand a chance of being enriched and refined.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> There is an obvious congruence here between Graff's views and William James's notion of meliorism. For penetrating discussions of James's meliorism see Scott R. Stroud, "William James on Meliorism, Moral Ideas, and Business Ethics," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2009), p. 379, and Henry Jackman, "James's Empirical Assumptions: On Materials, Meliorism, and Eternalism," *Streams of William James*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2004), p. 25.

*Literature Against Itself* is first and foremost Graff's plea for recognizing the value of realism and referentiality in literature. In the face of concerted attacks on the referential status of fiction, he stands by the traditional assumption that one of the primary functions of literary discourse is to reflect and represent something outside of itself. Crucially, nowhere in his book does he claim that works of literature are simply iconic images of reality; rather, well aware of the complex nature of artistic conventions, Graff merely emphasizes the impossibility of completely divorcing the literary signifier from its signified. To expose the faulty logic of anti-realists, he reconstructs their argument about the increasingly 'unreal' quality of contemporary reality: "Proceeding from the valid insight that something has happened to the sense of reality and that modern technological reality is in some profound sense unreal, many writers and critics leap to the conclusion that literature must for this reason abandon its pretensions to represent external reality and become either a self-contained reality unto itself or a disintegrated, dispersed process."<sup>16</sup> To their objection that the mimetic perspective seems excessively naïve, Graff responds by noting that the problem lies in the absence of a good up-to-date critical vocabulary which would be sophisticated enough to do justice to the intricate relationship between the fictive and the real.<sup>17</sup> He concludes by putting a premium on the "critical and explanatory power"<sup>18</sup> of literature, which is dependent on external validation.

Another crucial premise which defines Graff's position on literature is closely connected with his major claim about art being inextricably interwoven with history. In her famous essay published in 1929, Virginia Woolf described fiction in terms of a spider's web which is "attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners."<sup>19</sup> Graff seems to subscribe to this

<sup>16</sup> Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," in: *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Vol. 2

position when he insists that "only a historical view provides a perspective from which to assess the richness and poverty of the contemporary."<sup>20</sup> Commenting on a passage from D. S. Carne-Ross's essay "Scenario for a New Year," he arrives at the conclusion that "history is a criticism of the present."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, what he proposes is a "rehabilitation of history"<sup>22</sup> in literary studies, a program which views history in the totality of its development. In some respects, Graff's ideas anticipate the emergence of New Historicism in the 1980's, although his argument is not so firmly based in a clearly defined ideological agenda. Characteristically, his conclusions are practice-oriented; in this particular context, he elaborates on the benefits which applying a historical perspective in literary studies might bring to education.

Graff's writings usually steer clear of politics but there is an essay of his which openly addresses the issue of politically committed pedagogy. In it, he expresses his skepticism about the assumptions of radical pedagogy, identifying an insoluble dilemma which most teachers face. Either they have to suppress their own political agendas in order to make classrooms more democratic and less hierarchical or they explicitly engage with pressing political issues which carry an educational potential at the risk of imposing their views on their students and, consequently, of being accused of pedagogical authoritarianism and indoctrination. Graff's response to this dilemma is quite ingenious: he opts for removing the opposition between the two strategies by refusing to adopt an *a priori* political stance. In a truly pragmatic manner, he maintains that "like most questions about teaching, the question of how to bring political issues into classrooms is contingent on specific local contexts."<sup>23</sup> Further, Graff acknowledges that his preferred policy is to follow "a devil's advocacy politics in

class, opposing whatever is the dominant mindset of the students."<sup>24</sup> In other words, his professed views are not his own; Graff is prepared to advocate any contestable position, depending on "the ideological tilt of the students."<sup>25</sup> His choice of a relevant strategy is adjusted to the pedagogical requirements of a particular situation. Political issues are thus given an appropriate airing while the teacher abstains from imposing her/his own agenda on the students.

Graff's claim about his own commitment to educational outcomes rather than political views is not to be construed as his renunciation of the latter. In the most recent of his writings he declares his interest in what he describes as "democratizing academic culture."<sup>26</sup> The best way to achieve this goal is, according to Graff, by helping "students become active participants in the important conversations of the academic world and the wider academic sphere."<sup>27</sup> This lies at the foundations of his project, which consists in demystifying academic culture and empowering students by developing their argumentative talents (more on this in Section II). The project, developed in *Clueless in Academe* and *They Say/I Say*, involves a crucial ethical dimension which epitomizes Graff's views and provides a significant continuity between *Literature Against Itself* and his latest books. The dimension is aptly expressed in Graff's own description of his approach to writing which "asks writers not simply to keep proving and reasserting what they already believe but to stretch what they believe by putting it up against beliefs that differ, sometimes radically, from their own."<sup>28</sup> Writing is thus to be dialogic in the sense that it should be open to contestation and counterarguments; writers are obliged to take into account the perspectives of all those who think

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(New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p. 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 124.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Gerald Graff, "Teaching Politically without Political Correctness," *Radical Teacher*, no. 58 (2000), p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. xvii.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

otherwise.<sup>29</sup> On the face of it, his project may not look like much of a contribution to the promotion of democratic ideals, but Graff is well aware of the formative function of a liberal education and realizes that some basic skills connected with writing and thinking will have far-reaching consequences as soon as his students become active participants in public life.

Graff is convinced that the skills inculcated in his students will turn them into intellectuals, that is, individuals who feel at home in the culture of ideas and arguments. He carefully distinguishes, however, between being educated and being an intellectual: "Not all 'academics' are 'intellectuals,' and intellectuals come in many different types, including academic scholars, journalistic public intellectuals, policy wonks, information managers, media pundits, and legal and government professionals. What these different types have in common ... is a commitment to articulating ideas in public."<sup>30</sup> That is why he insists that, rather than acquiring a solid knowledge of a particular field, students should be primarily exposed to the techniques of arguing and making claims, defending their positions and identifying those of others. Those competences are likely to prove useful in their lives outside the university, no matter what positions they are going to hold. In this respect, their education is supposed to be thoroughly practical, and Graff puts emphasis on its *terminus ad quem*, that is, the ends it is meant to serve.

A practical thrust is also clearly visible in Graff's approach to criticism and theory. Unlike most who oppose introducing students to a discourse which is secondary to literature itself, he believes that, in the academy, criticism is the very air we breathe: "[I]like

Molière's gentleman who suddenly realized he had been speaking prose all his life, we need to recognize that criticism is what we inevitably do when we talk about a work of art."<sup>31</sup> What students are exposed to in the classroom is not an unmediated contact with 'English literature' because our perception of the literary text is predetermined by critical discourse which supplies us with the only available models of discussing literature. Graff claims that even the crudest and most spontaneous reactions to literature (his examples include "Oh, wow" and "It sucks"<sup>32</sup>) constitute samples of 'secondary' critical discourse. Therefore there is no point in denying students access to critical texts on the grounds that they are too difficult and students are not prepared to understand them until they have studied the literary text in detail, as those texts are vital models of how to read and discuss literature in a rigorous way (more on this in Section III). After all, the primary task of the English department is to educate competent critics, rather than artists who will emulate the language of fiction or poetry.

Graff's notion of theory is also couched in simple, pragmatic terms. In *Beyond the Culture Wars* he follows Terry Eagleton's reflections on the subject and comes to the conclusion that theory is tantamount to thinking.<sup>33</sup> Graff notes that we are usually forced to rethink some crucial assumptions about what we do when someone or something poses a challenge to what we have taken for granted. Then theory 'breaks out,'<sup>34</sup> as he has it; it is "the kind of self-consciousness that results when a community ceases to agree on these heretofore seemingly obvious, 'normal' assumptions...."<sup>35</sup> Consequently, Graff distinguishes between the kind of theory which the New Pragmatists (in this case Walter Benn Michael and Steven Knapp) attack in their essay "Against Theory" and a more broadly understood "discourse concerned with the legitimate principles,

<sup>29</sup> Wayne C. Booth seems to endorse Graff's position when he puts forward his notion of 'listening-rhetoric' which consists in "the whole range of communicative arts for reducing misunderstanding by paying full attention to opposing views." Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (Malden, Oxford, and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 54.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

assumptions and premises of literature and literary criticism.”<sup>36</sup> The most elaborate definition of theory he offers is to be found in the final pages of *Professing Literature*:

Thus, another way of describing literary theory is as a discourse that treats literature as in some respect a problem and seeks to formulate that problem in general terms. Theory is what is generated when some aspect of literature, its nature, its history, its place in society, its conditions of production and reception, its meaning in general, or the meanings of particular works, ceases to be given and becomes a question to be argued in a generalized way. Theory is what inevitably arises when literary conventions and critical definitions once taken for granted have become objects of generalized discussion and dispute.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, Graff identifies theory with our critical response to the increasingly unstable and contestable quality of the received notions of culture, literature and communication. Theory emerges from specific historical circumstances which have given rise to our incertitude and apprehensions concerning those notions. In effect, theorizing is, paradoxically, a practical, therapeutic mode of reflection<sup>38</sup> which embarks on the task of dispersing doubts and arriving at clear and convincing answers to the nagging questions about the status of intellectual, artistic and social conventions and definitions.

## II

One of the most pragmatic aspects of Graff's professional activity is connected with his critique of academia's excesses and deficiencies, particularly in the context of humanities education. Most of his writings are intended as interventions or correctives which deal with specific problems and offer practical solutions. In this section I take a closer look at Graff's views on

research and education to see how his books address the institutional impasses that are all too evident in the contemporary university. His primary focus is on literary studies (or what Jacques Derrida described as “this strange institution called literature”<sup>39</sup>) and the English department as its basic locus, but many of the points he makes apply in equal measure to academia at large.

It is already in *Literature Against Itself* that Graff expresses his criticism of the contemporary measures of professional achievement. His principal worry is that quantitative ‘production’ of scholarship and criticism may, in the long run, result in increasing neglect of the “canons of proof, evidence, logical consistency, and clarity of expression.”<sup>40</sup> In *Professing Literature*, his historical overview of the profession of literary studies, he observes that a paradigm shift occurred after World War II. Earlier, scholars had been encouraged to publish but their primary duty was to acquire knowledge (“Study much, publish little” was the academic motto since the establishment of Johns Hopkins, the first research university in the United States<sup>41</sup>). In the second half of the 20th century “publish or perish” became a professional imperative for all those who wanted to further their academic careers. According to Graff, one of the crucial problems with the recent deluge of scholarly publications is that they have served no purpose whatsoever, save that of safeguarding the academic positions of their authors.

One of the deplorable consequences of prioritizing published research is the denigration of teaching. Graff seems to realize that the process is inevitable<sup>42</sup> and yet he is determined to reach a compromise between the two by claiming that research may and should be geared to teaching, at least up to a point. For that to happen, we must first recognize that “[a]cademia itself has become part of the mass culture industry, which

<sup>36</sup> Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 252.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> This is how Richard Rorty describes pragmatism in his interview with E. P. Ragg: “I think of pragmatism as primarily therapeutic philosophy – therapy conducted on certain mind-sets created by previous philosophers.” Rorty, “Worlds or Words Apart?”, p. 373.

<sup>39</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> Graff, *Professing Literature*, p. 59.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

disseminates and popularizes academic trends and theories.”<sup>43</sup> The problem with translating this insight into practical solutions is that academia does not know how to advertize its own benefits: what it has to offer is often obscured from public view by unintelligible jargon, its own prejudices against being communicative (even at the cost of being reductive), and the assumption of incompatibility between the cloistered universe of the university (what Graff also describes in terms of “the ivory-tower mandarinism of the professors”<sup>44</sup>) and the world outside. Students themselves are often discouraged from developing an interest in the research done by their professors due to what Graff identifies as the mystification of research as such and an entrenched conviction that it is too sophisticated for undergraduates. The research would certainly be fit for them, Graff concludes, “if it were better written and more interestingly conceived.”<sup>45</sup>

Graff's critical remarks about research constitute a significant contribution to the ongoing debate over the future of literary studies. Equally insightful are his reflections on literary education, especially those concerned with the curriculum. In *Beyond the Culture Wars* he devotes much of his attention to the issues which are directly relevant to the organization of literary courses as well as their contents. First, against the charges of conservative critics, he argues that the alleged ‘canonicide’<sup>46</sup> has not really occurred; in his opinion the claims that contemporary fiction of mediocre artistic quality has replaced the classics on most reading lists are overblown. Graff argues that the canon evolves in a much less revolutionary manner, by “accretion at the margins, not by dumping the classics.”<sup>47</sup> And yet our attitude to the classics requires a reconsideration because what really endangers them is the reverential awe with which we approach those writings. By protecting them from disrespect, we betray

anxiety about their actual value: “Though this protective attitude postures as a form of reverence of Western culture, it really betrays a lack of confidence in that culture, whose monuments we evidently fear cannot stand up to criticism.”<sup>48</sup> Graff abstains from advocating radical alterations of the canon but he is decidedly critical of the conservative positions represented by such prominent defenders of the classics as Harold Bloom.<sup>49</sup>

According to Graff, many conservative postulates about education are unacceptable for the simple reason that they are ineffective. For example, William J. Bennett's naïve assumption of a common culture should be transformed into “a *common discussion* about culture, which implies agreement only to debate our different beliefs, tastes, and values, with the help of whatever common language, assumptions, and conclusions we are able to discover through the process of discussion itself.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise, on a more practical level, Graff is skeptical of those commonsensical approaches to literature which stipulate that the students ‘just read the books.’ He believes that teaching literature always involves its interpretation, and pretending otherwise will be pedagogically disastrous in the long run.<sup>51</sup> What he stresses is that reading books is a social activity which is meant to provide intellectual stimulation. To vindicate the potential value of heretofore marginalized works of literature, he indicates that texts are never difficult or easy in themselves; what matters is the kind of questions asked about them. As Graff puts it, “There is no functional connection between the status level of a text (however this may be measured) and the degree of complexity or difficulty attained by the interpretation of it for some hypothetical average reader.”<sup>52</sup> A corollary of this is that, for didactic purposes, interpretation is more

<sup>43</sup> Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 109-110.

<sup>45</sup> Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, 35.

<sup>46</sup> See Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> Bloom's most spectacular diatribe against what he calls “the School of Resentment” (which allegedly proposes to remove numerous classics from reading lists) is to be found in his *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Papermac, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

important than its own object. Again, Graff is pragmatic to the point of treating even the greatest works of literature instrumentally.

Open to new developments in education as he is, Graff is not prepared to accept those innovations that duck rather than confront existing pedagogical problems. When it comes to the curriculum he realizes that it cannot possibly reflect a common culture but neither is he happy with what he calls "a mere cafeteria counter of professorial research interests."<sup>53</sup> This model, based on the field coverage principle, assumes that individual courses have nothing to do with each other; they are not integrated in any way so as not to impose any totalizing framework on the curriculum. Each course constitutes an independent unit, which, according to Graff, leads to "the course fetish": detached from the institutional setting and isolated from the outside world, it is based on "the cult of the great teacher."<sup>54</sup> The course fetish is closely connected with an idealized image of academic education:

... the most familiar representation of the sentimental image of the course as a scene of conflict-free community is the one presented on untold numbers of college catalog covers: A small, intimate class is sprawled informally on the gently sloping campus greensward, shady trees overhead and ivy-covered buildings in the background. Ringed in casual semicircle, the students gaze with rapt attention at a teacher who is reading aloud from a small book – a volume of poetry, we inevitably assume, probably Keats or Dickinson or Whitman. The classroom, in these images, is a garden occupying a redemptive space inside the bureaucratic and professional machine. It is a realm of unity and presence in a world otherwise given over to endless difference, conflict, competition, and factionalism.<sup>55</sup>

Graff's ironic image demonstrates how not only students but also teachers delude themselves into believing that education may be stripped of its institutional and ideological dimension when the professors refuse to acknowledge larger responsibilities beyond their own

courses. The university will never serve its basic function – that of preparing students for handling real-life problems in a world rife with social differences and conflicts – unless individual courses are purposefully coordinated to reflect the diversity of perspectives and ways of arguing about vital issues.<sup>56</sup> Hence Graff's insistence that the curriculum be "a microcosm ... of a clash of cultures and values in America as a whole."<sup>57</sup> This assumption underlies his conception of 'teaching the conflicts,' which I will enlarge on in Section III of this essay.

One of the most penetrating insights that Graff offers about liberal education is connected with what he calls the argument game, which should give coherence to the entire curriculum. In *Clueless in Academe*, he argues that students are baffled not so much by the content of the various courses they attend<sup>58</sup> as by the opacity which accompanies academic communication. In effect, what should be prioritized is obscured and made inaccessible: the best and most useful aspects of academic discourse lose out in confrontation with academia's peculiar predilection for unintelligibility and obfuscation. Graff has no doubt that what is central to humanities education is skill of argumentation, which is closely related to persuasive public discourse. Taking his cue from Hillel Crandus, he highlights the importance of Arguespeak, the kind of persuasive discourse that is common to many verbal modes of public activity. Besides strictly academic contexts, it is present in journalistic communication, political debates and even in the talk of students themselves.<sup>59</sup> Graff claims that learning Arguespeak has far-reaching educational and

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 116-117.

<sup>56</sup> In *Professing Literature*, Graff puts it in the following way: "The question is how the many different kinds of things professors of literature do may be so organized as to begin providing a context for one another and take on a measure of corporate existence in the eyes of the world" (p. 251).

<sup>57</sup> Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Graff's name for the cognitive dissonance (caused by divergent syllabi and incompatible perspectives) which students have to cope with is the Volleyball Effect – see Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 65.

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 23.



personal consequences; it entails "becoming socialized into a way of life that changes who you are."<sup>60</sup> By acquiring argumentative skills, students develop their own sense of self in relation to others and learn to define and defend their perspectives in confrontation with alien points of view.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, Graff's vision of their academic socialization into the argument culture is premised on a holistic notion of education.

### III

The centrality of persuasive argument in the university and culture in general seems to be Graff's formula for remedying the crucial problems which have recently bedeviled academia. The critics of his project may object that his own argument is restricted to the humanities at best, and to literary studies at worst. It is a fact that Graff is principally concerned with liberal education but at numerous points he claims that clear and reasoned persuasion underlies many other discourses, including the sciences. Certainly, his position transcends the purview of literary education and seems to assume a transdisciplinary perspective which may become a more productive approach in the future.

In an interesting essay concerned with disciplinarity, Sheldon Pollock makes a forceful claim about philology being a particularly fitting candidate for the status of a core knowledge form. He identifies three minimal requirements that such knowledge forms will have to meet in the twenty-first-century university. Those involve an awareness of the discipline's own historicity, a global and comparable perspective and an understanding of the changing criteria for truth-claims made both in the past and at the present time (what he

calls 'epistemic politics').<sup>62</sup> To be sure, Graff does not formulate his own project in terms of a new philology; what emerges from his writings, however, may be construed as a blueprint for refashioning not just the English department but also humanities education as a whole. At the same time it is evident that his contributions rely on the rhetorical and philological tradition which has emphasized the significance of writing and speaking as crucial modes of participation in public discourse.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, in this section, I discuss Graff's practical suggestions which are intended to improve both the quality of communication within the academy and its public image.

Chronologically, Graff's first major contribution is presented at length in *Beyond the Culture Wars*, although it is anticipated already in the final pages of *Professing Literature*.<sup>64</sup> His solution to the problem of the mixed-message curriculum, which I discussed in Section II, is the project of teaching the conflicts. Graff's working assumption is that contemporary conflicts in the academy are "a measure of its vitality, not its decline."<sup>65</sup> Hence his plea that we recognize the legitimacy of conflicts in the university. Otherwise, we will only delude ourselves that we constitute an intellectual community: "While it [i.e., the university] welcomes diversity and innovation, it neutralizes the conflicts which result from them. This it does by keeping warring parties in noncommunicating courses and departments and by basing the curriculum on a principle of live and let live: I won't try to prevent you from teaching and studying what you want if you don't try to prevent me from

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 24; see, also, p. 57.

<sup>61</sup> In this particular context, one crucial statement from Dewey's *Democracy and Education* seems to be especially relevant as an underlying principle of Graff's perspective: "A being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account." Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 16.

<sup>62</sup> Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2009), p. 948.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., Graff and Birkenstein, *They Say*, p. xxii. Also, there are important interconnections between Graff's model of teaching the conflicts and contemporary approaches to rhetoric. For example, Steven Mailloux makes note of the usefulness of Graff's views for his own notion of cultural rhetoric – see Steven Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 183.

<sup>64</sup> See Graff, *Professing Literature*, pp. 250-252.

<sup>65</sup> Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 4.

teaching and studying what I want.”<sup>66</sup> And yet, by bringing various conflicting views out of the closet and making them explicit to the students we are more likely to give them an opportunity to “make sense of their education and their lives.”<sup>67</sup> Consequently, for Graff, ‘teaching the conflicts’ is shorthand for a pragmatic program which stands a chance of bestowing coherence and purpose upon the curriculum.

Graff illustrates the idea of incorporating conflicts into the curriculum by discussing his own teaching practice. He describes the case of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, a book which he used to teach as a universal parable of reason and unreason. However, once he realized that its reception may vary depending, e.g., on the reader’s ethnic background he started looking at the work from other angles, too. What inspired this shift of perception was an essay by Chinua Achebe, who claims that Conrad’s presentation of black Africa is shot through with racism. Graff decided to contrast those two perspectives (i.e., his own interpretation of Conrad’s work and Achebe’s) with each other and present the critical conflict to his students. More than that, he encouraged them to read short essays representing positions which are hostile to his own, thereby giving the students a chance to develop a critical perspective on their instructor’s views. Also, he invited other critics and teachers into his class to debate the controversial issues and expose the latent disagreements about Conrad’s book, which academics usually brush under the carpet as soon as they enter the classroom. The experience of teaching *Heart of Darkness* has led Graff to conclude that “[i]nstead of endlessly lamenting the intrusion of politics into the curriculum, we would do better to bring into the curriculum itself whatever may be instructive in the clashes of political and philosophical principles that have shaped it.”<sup>68</sup> If liberal education is to be more sensitive to the plurality of perspectives which characterizes democratic societies, teaching the conflicts

is certainly a good strategy for exposing students to the disputes and disagreements which they will face in non-academic contexts.

In a more general sense, Graff’s notion of teaching the conflicts reflects his view of academic discourse as a conversation, rather than a monologue. The idiom of entering the conversation, borrowed from Kenneth Burke,<sup>69</sup> is central to Graff’s approach to academic writing. In his incisive critique of academic habits of communication, he describes what many academics write as being “turgid, pretentious, jargon-ridden, and humorless.”<sup>70</sup> In consequence, their ideas are not clearly expressed, and certainly are not accessible to anyone outside the immediate circle of the few specialists who are concerned with the same field. Graff realizes that it is impossible to renounce the jargon completely: he does not encourage scholars to translate their insights into slang or nursery rhymes. Still, he believes that academic writing would benefit enormously from relying on what he describes as a bridge discourse, which would make communication between the academics and the students more effective.<sup>71</sup> His notion of the bridge discourse assumes that academic writing should incorporate elements of both the vernacular and the academic. Often, that will involve restating the same points in two different ways: “effective academic writing tends to be bilingual (or ‘diglossial’), making its point in Academes and making it again in the vernacular, a repetition that, interestingly, alters the meaning.”<sup>72</sup> Again, what underlies Graff’s position is a conviction that the gap between academic and non-academic cultures is not so wide, and there is no reason why it should be exaggerated by the opacity of language in which academics couch their most important conclusions.

One of the most effective solutions to the opacity of academic discourse is the judicious use of metacommentary. In *They Say/I Say*, Graff and Cathy

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>69</sup> See Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 158.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>71</sup> See ibid., p. 133.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

Birkenstein begin their discussion of the issue with a simple explanation of what they mean by metacommentary. They state that it is “a way of commenting on your claims and telling others how – and how *not* – to think about them.”<sup>73</sup> Metacommentary occurs in everyday conversations, not just in academic writing; in fact, our daily reliance on such formulas as ‘What I mean to say is that...’ or ‘I don’t want you to think that...’ or ‘I’m not saying that...’ suggests that all modes of communication benefit from such clarifications. Still, in the context of academic writing metacommentary is particularly important. Here is how Graff and Birkenstein explain the reasons for using it:

Even the best writers can provoke reactions in readers that they didn’t intend, and even good readers can get lost in a complicated argument or fail to see how one point connects with another. Readers may also fail to see what follows from your argument, or they may follow your reasoning and examples yet fail to see the larger conclusion you draw from them. They may fail to see your argument’s overall significance, or mistake what you are saying for a related argument that they have heard before but that you want to distance yourself from. As a result, no matter how straightforward a writer you are, readers still need you to help them grasp what you really mean.<sup>74</sup>

The point that Graff and Birkenstein make about the usefulness of metacommentary is plain and does not seem to need restating. The value of their most recent book, however, lies in more than just the simple conclusion that academic writing should involve a clarifying dimension. Above all, *They Say/I Say* is a practical compendium of writing techniques, including examples of usage and ready-made templates which students, but also more experienced writers, may incorporate into their arguments to make them cogent and persuasive. Graff’s educational pragmatism is here at its best; instead of theorizing *écriture* (or any other philosophical abstractions), he focuses on practical skills which translate directly into more effective ways of communicating with others.

Another useful strategy for making academic writing relevant to as many readers as possible consists in what Graff describes as ‘planting a naysayer in your text.’<sup>75</sup> Even the most carefully thought-out texts may fail to generate a lively response on the part of their target audience if their writers fail to inscribe them in a certain oppositional framework. In other words, to engage the reader’s attention, our writing must make a point in relation to other positions on an issue, preferably by way of contrast. It is not enough to state our own claim; we must also indicate why this claim needs to be made. The best way to do so is by pitching our views against commonly held beliefs, or those of recognized authorities in a given field. Thereby, we provide a rationale for our writing and answer two all-important questions which Graff encourages all writers to ask themselves before they make their own claim: ‘So what?’ and ‘Who cares?’<sup>76</sup> Otherwise, the claims are not ‘arguable,’ that is, without the necessity of defending them by providing convincing arguments writers will never persuade anybody of their significance. In this sense, the best and most interesting academic texts advance claims which at first appear controversial and counterintuitive.

Given Graff’s interest in writing and his conviction that “the public argument culture is the name of the academic game,”<sup>77</sup> it comes as no surprise that he highlights the centrality of composition courses to humanities education in general. This is not to say that, in the context of pedagogical practices, he has no other suggestions to offer. In *Beyond the Culture Wars*, he observes that academic writing could gain a new impetus from a dialogue with journalism, which may provide models of how to convey complex issues in a concise and appealing manner. Also, he has a number of interesting ideas about how to effect curricular integration. One of them involves “an adaptation of the academic conference or symposium to the needs of the

<sup>73</sup> Graff and Birkenstein, *They Say*, p. 129.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>75</sup> See Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 158.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 119 and 136.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

undergraduate curriculum.”<sup>78</sup> Another envisages collaboration between teachers from different departments who would assign the same text in a particular semester and then hold a transcourse conference “in order to compare different approaches, clarify disputed issues, and give students a more dramatic sense of the wider debate than a single course can provide.”<sup>79</sup> All these ideas assume the usefulness of coordinated teaching, one of Graff's major postulates connected with refashioning the present-day academy. Implicitly, they also entail a redefinition of the role of the teacher and her/his authority in the classroom. No longer a solo performer – satirically portrayed as the vanguard professor-intellectual already in *Literature Against Itself*<sup>80</sup> – she/he must be poised to have her/his views challenged and, possibly, also defeated by those who bring different perspectives into the conversation. This may be one of the main reasons why Graff's program has not been enthusiastically received in many quarters. After all, few professors will be happy to relinquish part of their authority and prerogatives unless they realize that, in the long run, it is in their own interest.

Apropos literature courses, Graff emphasizes the value of exposing students to secondary sources which contextualize and interrogate the literary text itself. His insistence that critical essays are particularly useful didactic materials may seem questionable, yet his argument is cogent and firmly rooted in his notion of humanities education. To begin with, he claims that many teachers tend to overrate the primary experience of literature, which they oppose to secondary analyses. This approach rests on the conviction that an inchoate response is more authentic, while critical discussions of literature may involve an imposition of the teacher's perspective on the students' spontaneous reactions. However, this is to ignore the fact that our reactions are always mediated by a cultural context which provides us

with a critical vocabulary to articulate our response to the text. In the classroom, when we ask students to speak about how they ‘feel’ about a book, or a poem, we assume that they already know how to express their primary experience in relatively communicative discourse. Graff maintains, in turn, that this response requires models of assessing and analyzing texts, which only critical essays may offer.<sup>81</sup> Literary education is, accordingly, a matter of developing students' critical skills, rather than giving them an opportunity to enjoy what they might fail to appreciate on their own. This is not to say that a critical assessment of a work of literature should not tap into the students' primary aesthetic experience, but exposing them to carefully chosen critical writings may be the best way to engage their attention and elicit articulate responses: once they see that a literary text is a subject of critical controversy and there are issues which the critics disagree about, they are likely to be drawn into an exchange of opinions.<sup>82</sup> Finally, students are encouraged to express their responses in a language which matches the rigor and coherence of academic writing.

It is emblematic of Graff's views that all his assumptions are tested in classroom conditions. That is why he is aware of the potential problems that might result from exposing students to excessively sophisticated critical discourse: “When teachers recoil at the idea of assigning criticism, they are often thinking of opaque or unreadable criticism whose effect in their classes has been or would be deadly. Yet even when criticism is lucid and well written it may be poorly suited to students' needs, and end up only confirming suspicions that such material has nothing to say to anyone who is not an academic specialist.”<sup>83</sup> Therefore what is required of the teacher is considerable discrimination in the choice and preparation of the critical writings. Graff describes how over many years he has accumulated a number of published essays which, by trial and error, proved to be

<sup>78</sup> Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 188.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>80</sup> See Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, 116.

<sup>81</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>82</sup> See Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, 163-168.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

useful in his own teaching.<sup>84</sup> Also, he has co-edited with James Phelan two textbooks organized around the critical controversies surrounding Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The books contain primary texts along with selected critical essays which reflect the debates and disagreements between the critics. Students are thereby provided with a larger context which gives them a chance to relate their responses to those already made by others. Again, underlining this particular didactic strategy is Graff's belief that the opposition between teaching and research is unnecessary<sup>85</sup> and that humanities education should put a premium on students' argumentative skills, which they are likely to find useful in public contexts.

My discussion of Graff's views and writings has been largely expository but now it is time to return to the claim which I made at the outset of this essay. It is true that he has never explicitly identified his position as pragmatist and yet, from what I have discussed above, it clearly transpires that Graff's notions of literature and pedagogy are akin to those of John Dewey and other champions of progressive education. Moreover, the thrust of Graff's arguments is almost invariably practice-oriented, while his academic career has been testimony to his commitment to bettering not only the academic community but also democratic society at large. This ameliorative dimension of his intellectual activity puts him in the ranks of the most prominent contemporary scholars and teachers whose interpretation of pragmatism puts the lie to Marshall Sahlin's sarcastic definition of the university as an institution which is concerned with "the pursuit of disinterested knowledge by self-interested people."<sup>86</sup> It is fair to conclude that Graff's writings, as well as other forms of his academic activity, emerge as genuine harbingers of a better future for the humanities.

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<sup>84</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>85</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> Marshall Sahlin, "The Conflicts of the Faculty," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2009), p. 999.

## PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS: LITERARY AND ANALYTIC ROOTS

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Readers might not be surprised to find me in this special issue on pragmatism and literature not only because my philosophical reputation now rests primarily on the work I have done in pragmatist aesthetics but also because the issue's guest editor Dr. Małecki recently devoted a very intelligent monograph to my contributions to pragmatism and literary studies, his book entitled *Embodying Pragmatism: Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory* (2010).<sup>1</sup> There is no reason to contest Małecki's portrayal of me as an American pragmatist philosopher who also engages important insights and arguments from contemporary French and German theorists (though often polemically) and who has a penchant for unconventional philosophical topics such as popular art and somaesthetics. But it is useful to recall (both to myself and to other readers) that I enjoyed an active career in philosophy and literary theory long before I began considering myself as a pragmatist and invoking the theories of pragmatist philosophers in my work.<sup>2</sup> So in this brief essay I wish to revisit some of my central views on literary theory that precede my conversion to pragmatism and to consider the ways they anticipated (and perhaps led to) my later explicitly pragmatist theories.

It was only in mid-career (in the late 1980s) that I began to appreciate the rich value of pragmatist philosophy and tried to formulate an aesthetics founded on pragmatist principles. My guide, of course, was John Dewey, whose *Art as*

*Experience*<sup>3</sup> seemed to define the field because it was the only systematic pragmatist treatise in aesthetics. My *Pragmatist Aesthetics*<sup>4</sup> sought both to defend the Deweyan pragmatist project against the arguments of analytic philosophy, whose rise to dominance since the 1950s marginalized pragmatist thinking in aesthetics and other philosophical fields. But it also tried to redeem the experiential, embodied nature of pragmatist aesthetics that was disregarded or often explicitly rejected by neopragmatists like Richard Rorty for whom experience was a philosophically useless and indeed pernicious notion, committing us to the fallacious, foundationalist "myth of the given."

Trained as analytic philosopher in Jerusalem and Oxford, I had initially dismissed Dewey as a vague, fuzzy thinker unable to formulate crisp and concise arguments. Moreover, his prose struck me as flat, flaccid, and prolix. Such matters of literary style were important to me because my initial research focus was literary theory and the philosophy of literary criticism. Moreover, it was solidly nested in analytic philosophy, indeed exclusively so. My first two articles, published during my Oxford student days, were devoted to literature and the logic of its criticism and appeared in highly-ranked analytic journals: "The Anomalous Nature of Literature"<sup>5</sup> and "The Logic of Interpretation."<sup>6</sup> Other early papers were devoted to topics involving the convergence of literature and analytic philosophy: Bertrand Russell's literary fiction, the different logics of literary evaluation and critical reasoning, the analytic philosophical influences on T.S. Eliot's literary theory and practice.

My first book, *The Object of Literary Criticism*,<sup>7</sup> was a conventional work of analytic philosophy and far from the provocative topics (like rap, popular culture, and somaesthetics) with which my pragmatism is often

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<sup>1</sup> Wojciech Małecki, *Embodying Pragmatism: Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory* (Frankfurt am Main-New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Małecki is certainly aware of this earlier career, since he has published interviews with me that touch on it. For readers interested in this material, see Richard Shusterman, "Od literatury do somatoestetyki: Z Richardem Shustermanem rozmawia Wojciech Małecki" ["From Literature to Somaesthetics: An Interview with Richard Shusterman, by Wojciech Małecki], *Teksty Drugie*, No. 6 (2009), pp. 198-221. His choice to give his book a sharper focus by limiting it to the pragmatist material is surely reasonable.

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<sup>3</sup> See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1934).

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Shusterman, "The Anomalous Nature of Literature," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1978), pp. 317-329

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Shusterman, "The Logic of Interpretation," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 28 (1978), pp. 310-324

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Shusterman, *The Object of Literary Criticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984).



identified. It was instead devoted to mainstream analytic questions in philosophy of literature (i.e., the identity and ontological status of works and the logic of methods used in interpreting and evaluating them). Its analytic style was that of ordinary language philosophy made most famous by Wittgenstein's later work at Cambridge and by J.L. Austin (in Oxford). My thesis supervisor at Oxford, J. L. Urmson, was Austin's student and literary executor, and *The Object of Literary Criticism* was based on my dissertation of that title, submitted for the Oxford D. Phil. in 1979. I was, indeed, so completely (and complacently) absorbed in the Anglo-American analytic context that this book on literary theory pays no attention at all to European poststructuralist theory and deconstructionist criticism, though they were already the dominant fashion in American literary and critical theory. Nor did it pay any attention to German critical theory, nor to pragmatism. C.S. Peirce was the only pragmatist philosopher mentioned in the book, and his appearance had nothing to do with his pragmatist ideas but rather with his logical notion of types and tokens, which was sometimes applied in analytic theories of work identity and individuation.

In Hebrew there is a proverb to the effect that doctrines deeply learned in one's youth (imbibed, as it were, with one's mother's milk) are not forgotten. My early analytic training in Jerusalem and Oxford was so thorough that my philosophical style of argument remains greatly marked by it, and in many contexts I still reach for my analytic toolbox of distinctions and strategies. Nonetheless, five years after the publishing my book on analytic literary theory, I was already beginning to worry about the limitations of the analytic approach in aesthetics and feel the attractions of pragmatism. Though my next book *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*<sup>8</sup> remained essentially an analytic study, its last chapter showed the pragmatist dimensions of Eliot's theory and practice and was entitled "Pragmatism and Practical Wisdom." Moreover, in the "Introduction" to an important collection of essays on *Analytic Aesthetics* that I edited for Blackwell,<sup>9</sup> I argued that the most promising

directions in analytic aesthetics had a distinctly pragmatic dimension.

My conversion to the general pragmatist perspective was already complete by 1992, when my book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* appeared – along with its abridged French version *L'art à l'état vif*.<sup>10</sup> A close seminar reading of Dewey's *Art as Experience* (done with a cadre of doctoral students, many of them in dance and oozing with experiential embodied enthusiasm) was what converted me to pragmatism, and I used that book's pragmatist perspectives to criticize the narrower, scholastic confines of analytic aesthetics. Though Dewey has remained the most lasting inspiration for my pragmatist thinking, I have increasingly recognized how many of his aesthetic theories were anticipated by other American pragmatists: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alain Locke, C.S. Peirce, and, perhaps most significantly, William James. Having demonstrated their contributions to pragmatist aesthetics in other publications,<sup>11</sup> I turn here instead to how certain key themes I advocated as pragmatist aesthetics were already present in the Wittgenstein- and Austin-inspired analytic theories formulated in *The Object of Literary Criticism* and more generally in my published work through the mid-1980s.

Though initially convinced that my pragmatist conversion took me very far from the thoroughly analytic approach of *The Object of Literary Criticism*, when I reread that text for its publication in French translation, I realized that this book was largely shaped by key themes that likewise centrally structure my pragmatist approach, themes that I now believe helped lead me toward pragmatism but also to certain French thinkers, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, who became increasingly important in my work.

One of these central themes is pluralism. Rather than assuming, as theory too often does, that there is only one

<sup>10</sup> See Richard Shusterman, *L'art à l'état vif: la pensée pragmatiste et l'esthétique populaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> For Emerson, see my "Emerson's Pragmatist Aesthetics," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, no. 207 (1999), p. 87-99; for Locke, see chapter 7 of my *Surface and Depth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); for James, see my "Dewey's Art as Experience: The Psychological Background," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2010), pp. 26-43; and "The Pragmatist Aesthetics of William James," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2011), pp. 347-361.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Shusterman, *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (London and New York: Duckworth and Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> See Richard Shusterman (ed.), *Analytic Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

right answer, logic, purpose, or method in the critical enterprise, my first book and early articles argue for a plurality of aims and frameworks in literary criticism, a plurality of legitimate logics and purposes in interpretation and evaluation, and a plurality of ways and contexts for defining the identity of literary works, whose ontological complexity also displays a plurality of aspects or dimensions. Literature and criticism are essentially valued, essentially complex, and essentially historical concepts, and therefore also essentially contested concepts. In these fields of competing methods, attitudes, purposes, styles and concepts, an open-minded pluralism of letting rival approaches have a chance to prove their different values in different contexts seemed the most reasonable approach.

This spirit of pluralism still inspires my pragmatist insistence on the value of both high art and popular art, the variety of useful modes of appropriating and understanding them, the legitimacy of different ways of living a philosophical life, the useful multiplicity of levels of body consciousness, and the variety of helpful somaesthetic disciplines, etc. Recognizing the plurality of useful practices and values (even when they sometimes compete for our attention or adherence) seems to be the best way to maximize our benefits in pursuing the multiple values of life. If I already recognized this in my analytic writings, it was not until my pragmatist phase that I was able to formulate this principle in terms of what I call the “inclusively disjunctive stance” in either/or situations: that when faced with different promising options, we should not presume that we must only accept one but should rather try to reconcile and realize as many as we can profitably combine together. Thus when asked whether we want to drink water or wine with our meal, there is no reason why we cannot drink both. In literature, there is no reason to limit one’s reading to poetry rather than prose, fiction rather than nonfiction, or vice versa.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise in criticism, there is no reason to affirm that only intentional or historical interpretation is legitimate while more creative, performative interpretation must be outlawed. The plurality of literary and critical forms is not an

anything goes relativism. There are better and worse interpretations, for example, but judgments of better and worse depend on the specific contexts in which one is interpreting (a newspaper review versus a scholarly article) and the purposes for which one seeks an interpretation (to discover the author’s intention or to make the work more relevant and meaningful to today’s readers). The analytic pluralism I developed with respect to interpretation was distinguished from a more limited pluralism which recognizes merely a plurality of valid objects and methods of interpretation. This limited pluralism allows for different approaches to or aspects of a work of literature with respect to which true or plausible interpretive assertions can be made.

My analytic pluralism went farther in arguing that not all interpretations are assertions that could be true or plausible; some have the logical status of recommendations while others are more like performatives rather than constative assertions. Literary interpretation, I argued, has no single, essential logic but is a family of games that often compete for our attention and for priority of value. Their validity and value (and the same goes for rival games of literary evaluation) depend not on antecedent philosophical or logical grounding but on the quality of their fruits in actual critical practice. “It is not the job of the philosopher of criticism, as analyst, to award the birthright” or provide an absolute ranking of these different practices, I wrote in *The Object of Literary Criticism*. “Having identified and analyzed these different and often competing critical practices, the analytic philosopher,” I continued “must let them justify themselves, as they have justified and must justify themselves, in actual critical practice.”<sup>13</sup>

Here we see how the primacy of practice for critical theory is another central pragmatist theme that pervades my early analytic work. As practice generates and shapes theory, so methodologies or logics of interpretation and evaluation are assessed in terms of the aims and fruits of their practice. The validity and value of different logics is not an abstract pluralist notion of tolerance but a recognition that criticism’s multiple methods are pragmatically justified by the different aims and values these practices realize. Although *The Object*

<sup>12</sup> For more discussion of this stance, see the “Introduction” to the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Shusterman, *The Object of Literary Criticism*, pp. 168-169.

of *Literary Criticism* is clearly a philosophical text of critical theory (that even occasionally employs abstract logical formulae), it tries to express the crucial importance of practice not only by general assertions but by specifically deriving its views on the logics of interpretation and evaluation from the actual practice of critics – by introducing and analyzing the specific arguments that especially influential critics have made.<sup>14</sup> The idea of integrating practical literary criticism into my analytic philosophical theory naturally continued into my work in pragmatism where it evolved into full scale analyses of literary works, elite and popular. *Pragmatist Aesthetics* thus contains a chapter built on a close critical reading of Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" and the lyrics of "Talkin' All that Jazz" by the Brooklyn rap crew Stetsasonic. Here, however, rather than relying primarily on analyzing the interpretations of other critics, I practiced my own interpretive analyses.

Working with real rather than hypothetical critical discourse exemplifies a fundamentally empirical orientation that I later found repeatedly emphasized by the classical pragmatist tradition. James and Dewey highlight experience not only as a crucial cognitive ground, instrument, and mode of assessment for theorizing, but also as the essential locus for realizing aesthetic values. Because my analytical study of literary criticism draws its examples from different periods of literary history, its empiricism has a diachronic dimension that shows how changing historical contexts can alter the aims and methods of literary critical practices. This empirical sense of historical change likewise reveals that literary critical practices rely on a background of cultural institutions and conventions that are always embedded in larger social and ideological contexts that are more than merely aesthetic or purely literary. It was from Wittgenstein and Austin that I first learned to appreciate the crucial role of historical and institutional contexts and conventions in determining meaning, practice, and theory. These historicist,

<sup>14</sup> If the critical work of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis figures most prominently in my early analytic work in philosophy of criticism, that is not only because they were the most influential critics for Oxford literary culture at that time, but also because their major texts were largely available in inexpensive paperbacks. For a penurious graduate student who felt uncomfortable in stuffy Oxford libraries and liked to own and annotate his readings, this factor of cost-efficiency was significant – revealing an altogether different manner in which pragmatic thinking shaped my doctoral work.

contextualist, and institutional perspectives prepared me to embrace the genealogical, contextual, sociopolitical dimensions of Dewey's pragmatist thought, along with those of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>15</sup>

These three authors, who helped push me beyond the limits of analytic philosophy taught me something that my doctoral thesis essentially ignored: the theorist's interventionist role in the cultural transformation of practices. *The Object of Literary Criticism* and my other work in analytic aesthetics emphasizes that the field of criticism is essentially contested – containing many practices or critical "games" (with fundamentally different logics) that compete with each other for dominance, power, and esteem. This pluralism came with a "hands-off" theoretical attitude in which the philosopher is supposed to analyze and compare those established practices but never to intervene by suggesting alternative methods or by championing some disparaged or neglected artistic genre. My later work in pragmatism, while still emphasizing the values of pluralism and the need to begin by recognizing and analyzing established cultural forms, is more engaged in the transformation of cultural (including critical) practices. The role of theory, as I now see it through pragmatist eyes, is not just to mirror cultural truths and their related practices but to improve them. That melioristic impulse is highlighted in my detailed pragmatist advocacy of certain kinds of popular art and of the art of living, and in affirming the cultivation of certain somatic disciplines for heightened awareness and attention. The meliorist impulse is also present in my case for the importance of writing in efforts of self-improvement in pursuing an ethical art of living as a form of philosophical

<sup>15</sup> The contextualist perspective can also be reflexively brought to bear on the analytic/pragmatist contrast that is widely used and that I deploy here. The contrast of these philosophical styles (which themselves are quite diverse in style) gets its effective meaning only within a particular context or background. The fact that many central themes remain continuous in my move from analytic to pragmatist aesthetics should warn us not to treat analytic and pragmatist philosophy as a neat dichotomy of incompatible orientations. There is indeed a significant strain of important twentieth-century philosophers who combine analytic methods and pragmatist insights: Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson, and also Wittgenstein and Austin. I see my work as inspired by that illustrious tradition.

life.<sup>16</sup> If meliorism implies advocacy, does advocacy not preclude pluralism? Not at all. For pluralism is not an “anything goes anywhere” indifference.

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<sup>16</sup> See Richard Shusterman, “Philosophy as Literature and More than Literature,” in: *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Garry Hagberg and Walter Jost (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 7-21.

**EURO-AMERICAN RHETORICAL PRAGMATISM:  
DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION, HUMANIST CONTROVERSIES,  
AND PURPOSEFUL MEDIATION**

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For over a century Euro-American pragmatism has developed as a philosophical movement that takes seriously the human significance of language. Indeed, one might characterize much pragmatist thought as specifically being preoccupied with rhetoric, the use of language in a context to have effects. Inside the academy this rhetorical pragmatism often registers as a language-centered form of humanistic anti-foundationalism that refuses absolute distinctions between subject and object, meaning and significance, fact and value, knowledge and opinion, aesthetics and politics. In various non-academic public spheres, one version of this pragmatism supports a progressive pluralism and an inclusive deliberative democracy. In the following remarks, I would like to explore this tradition of Euro-American rhetorical pragmatism and one of its prominent features: a rhetoric of purposeful mediation.

Among recent rhetorical pragmatists we might include such academic and public intellectuals as Giles Gunn, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, Cornel West, and Jeffrey Stout.<sup>1</sup> These are neo-pragmatists who give special

attention to rhetoric or (more narrowly in Rorty's case) persuasion in the public sphere and connect this rhetorical attention explicitly to their articulation of pragmatism as a philosophical or critical theory. Such rhetorical pragmatism can be viewed as a version of postmodern sophistry: These neo-pragmatists are like some older Greek sophists partly because they share the pre-Platonic belief in a primordial unity of rhetoric and philosophy. Viewed from within the historical argument made by Edward Schiappa and others, sophists and pragmatists do not radically separate language use from the search for truth, rhetoric from philosophy.<sup>2</sup> It was Plato, the argument goes, who established this separation in the *Gorgias* when he coined the new term *rhêtorikê* and negatively distinguished it from *philosophia*. Rhetorical pragmatists reject this version of Platonism and embrace instead an anti-Platonist sophistic rhetoric.

But these contemporary neo-pragmatists do not emphasize their sophistic legacy as extensively as an earlier rhetorical pragmatist, the once-forgotten British philosopher, F. C. S. Schiller. I want to return here to an argument I made in my book *Reception Histories*, in which I claimed that Schiller's reading of Protagoras was essential to his early version of pragmatism that he called humanism.<sup>3</sup> During the turn to the twentieth century, the discourse of absolute idealism dominated the rhetorical context of philosophical debate in England. It was explicitly against this epistemological and metaphysical hegemony that F. C. S. Schiller directed much of his polemical energies, especially in his two

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<sup>1</sup> See Steven Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 22-42; idem, *Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2006), pp. 42-44, 51-52, 118-21; Steven Mailloux and Keith Gilyard, "Conversation," in: *Conversations in Cultural Rhetoric and Composition Studies*, ed. Keith Gilyard and Victor E. Taylor (Aurora: Davies Group, 2009), pp. 30-51. Also see Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric," in: *The Stanley Fish Reader*, ed. H. Aram Veeseer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 116-44; Keith Gilyard, *Composition and Cornel West: Notes toward a Deep Democracy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008); Robert Danisch, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (Columbia:

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University of South Carolina Press, 2007); and Nathan Crick, *Democracy and Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 40-49; Mailloux, *Reception Histories*, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Mailloux, *Reception Histories*, pp. 27-32. Also see Mark J. Porrovecchio, *F. C. S. Schiller and the Dawn of Pragmatism: The Rhetoric of a Philosophical Rebel* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011); and, more generally, *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*, ed. Steven Mailloux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

early books *Humanism* in 1903 and *Studies in Humanism* four years later. Both of these books were praised by the American pragmatists, William James and John Dewey, the former calling Schiller pragmatism's "most vivacious and pugnacious champion."<sup>4</sup>

One of the distinguishing features of Schiller's humanistic pragmatism was his use of Protagorean sophistry as an explanatory argument for his own theory. In fact, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that Schiller's reception of Protagoras constituted his philosophical position. That reception was an exemplary instance of a theoretical argument reading the past to mark out a place in the intellectual present and to set an agenda for the immediate future. Schiller's pragmatism re-interpreted sophistry to establish his anti-idealist argument within the cultural conversation of the early twentieth century. Schiller read Plato against the grain of the ancient philosopher's attack on sophistic rhetoric, and in so doing, he demonstrated how the insights of pragmatism and sophistry coincided perfectly. Schiller's reception of the sophists locates at least one form of pragmatism firmly within a sophistic rhetorical tradition, and Schiller enthusiastically argued for branding this form with the name "humanism."

Humanism has always been about human being and becoming. In classical Greece, Protagoras said, "Humans are the measure of all things, of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not." Platonists rejected such sophistry and could quote in support of their case the Athenian in Plato's *Laws* who declares "it is God who is the measure of all things, not humanity as some say" (716c). Though often in other terms, some of the most important "humanist controversies" of the last century restaged this debate

over Protagorean sophistry and Platonist philosophy.<sup>5</sup> During one such controversy, Schiller's 1903 book rejected the Platonist's charge that the human-measure dictum leads to skepticism and relativism. Instead, Schiller argues, Protagoras's claim that "man is the measure of all things," when "fairly interpreted, ... is the truest and most important thing that any thinker ever has propounded. It is only in travesties such as it suited Plato's dialectic purpose to circulate that it can be said to tend to skepticism; in reality it urges Science to discover how Man may measure, and by what devices make concordant his measures with those of his fellow-men."<sup>6</sup> One goal of sophistic rhetoric is to investigate and theorize how this rhetorical process takes place, to establish what rhetorical "devices make concordant" one citizen's measures with those of his or her fellow-citizens.

In his next book, *Studies in Humanism*, Schiller more clearly and more extensively demonstrates how his humanism is both sophistic and pragmatist. He remarks on the political context of classical Greece, noting that "the great humanistic movement of the fifth century B.C., of which [the Sophists] were the leaders, is now [early twentieth century] beginning to be appreciated at its true value ... The rise of democracies rendered a higher education and a power of public speaking a *sine qua non* of political influence – and, what acted probably as a still stronger incentive – of the safety of the life and property, particularly of the wealthier classes." The political, economic context of sophistic education resulted in "a great development of rhetoric and

<sup>4</sup> William James, "Humanism," *Nation* 78 (3 March 1904), pp. 175-76; rpt. James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 551.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, late-twentieth-century debates in the U.S. Culture Wars and specialized academic controversies over postmodernism or poststructuralism. Various anti-humanisms, neo-humanisms, and post-humanisms marked out significant theoretical positions within these heated intellectual and political conflicts. On the rhetoric of these and other humanist controversies, see Mailloux, *Reception Histories*, pp. 20-21, 151-81; and "Humanist Controversies: The Rhetorical Humanism of Ernesto Grassi and Michael Leff," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> F. C. S. Schiller, *Humanism: Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. xvii.



dialectic,” and the sophists definitely exploited this situation, growing wealthy in catering to their well-to-do clientele.<sup>7</sup> Schiller remarks in passing on the contradictory (democratic *and* undemocratic) origins of sophistic rhetoric and thus prefigures later debates over the problematic ideological affiliations of neo-sophistry and the dangerous political consequences of rhetoric more generally. Like many rhetorical pragmatists after him, Schiller identifies rhetoric with democracy – only in such a political structure, he argues, could sophistic rhetoric develop – but he also acknowledges that rhetoric could serve undemocratic interests when rhetorical education was restricted to the socio-economic elites.

There is a lot more to say about Schiller’s reading of Protagoras, especially in his 1908 pamphlet, *Plato or Protagoras?*, but instead I want to move on to some implications of the sophistic legacy for rhetorical pragmatism in relation to contemporary debates over the future of democratic deliberation. To make this move I will fast forward exactly one hundred years.

“In case you haven’t heard, Barack Obama is a pragmatist.” So begins Christopher Hayes’s December 2008 *Nation* article called, fittingly enough, “The Pragmatist.”<sup>8</sup> After noting how the term has often been used to describe the newly elected President and how that President himself has used the word “pragmatism” in recent public statements, Hayes asks: what exactly does it mean to call President Obama a pragmatist? In answering this question, Hayes helpfully points to “Obama’s famous rhetorical dexterity, which he’s marshaled to tremendous effect – giving progressives as well as centrists reasons to believe he shares their values and outlook. In a postelection essay on Obama, George Packer noted these two strains of his campaign rhetoric

and dubbed them the ‘progressive Obama’ and the ‘post-partisan Obama.’” According to Hayes, “pragmatic” here means something like “post-ideological.” Saying Obama is a pragmatist means simply that he is not a dogmatic ideologue; he is someone interested in practically getting things done and not someone blindly following an abstract ideological principle. But these are merely popular uses of the terms *pragmatic* and *pragmatist*. What, if anything, do they have to do with the more precise usage in relation to the specific tradition of American pragmatist philosophy?

Hayes himself raises this question when he notes:

Pragmatism in common usage may mean simply a practical approach to problems and affairs. But it’s also the name of the uniquely American school of philosophy whose doctrine is that truth is pre-eminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief. What unites the two senses of the word is a shared skepticism toward certainties derived from abstractions – one that is welcome and bracing after eight years of [the] failed, faith-based presidency [of President George W. Bush].

Hayes then tries to connect Obama intellectually to American pragmatist philosophy by way of the President’s political admiration for Abraham Lincoln. He implies that Obama’s admiration for Lincoln connects him to American pragmatism partly because the war Lincoln oversaw was a significant influence on the earliest philosophical pragmatists:

Having witnessed, and in some cases experienced firsthand, the horror of violence and irreconcilable ideological conflict during the Civil War, William James, Charles Peirce and Oliver Wendell Holmes were moved to reject the metaphysical certainty in eternal truths that had so motivated the [dogmatically ideological] abolitionists, emphasizing instead epistemic humility, contingency and the acquisition of knowledge through practice – trial and error.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> F. C. S. Schiller, *Studies in Humanism* (London: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 31-32.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hayes, “The Pragmatist,” *The Nation* (29 December 2008), pp. 13-16. <http://www.thenation.com/article/pragmatist> (accessed Dec 15, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> For a different, more detailed argument tying Obama to Pragmatism via Lincoln, see Susan Schulten, “Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, and John Dewey,” *Denver University Law Review*, vol. 86 (2009), pp. 807-818.

I will return later to the placing of President Obama in the pragmatist tradition, but for now I want to re-deploy a text Hayes cites in explaining that tradition, Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*. We can use a passage from Menand's prize-winning book to transform Hayes's specific claim for a connection between pragmatism and Obama into a broader argument about American pragmatism and U.S. rhetoric in general. Menand writes that after the Civil War the pragmatists "changed the way Americans thought – and continue to think – about education, democracy, liberty, justice, and tolerance. And as a consequence, they changed the way Americans live – the way they learn, *the way they express their views, the way they understand themselves*, and the way they treat people who are different from themselves. We are still living, to a great extent, in a country these thinkers helped to make."<sup>10</sup> Among Menand's claims here most relevant to my topic are the ones asserting that pragmatism significantly affected the way Americans express themselves (their rhetoric) and the way they interpret themselves (their identities), what we might call an American rhetorical hermeneutics.<sup>11</sup> I would like to follow up on just one strand of this rhetorical hermeneutics and speculate about Euro-American pragmatism's effects on U.S. rhetoric in various academic and non-academic contexts. This speculation involves making a case for pragmatism as a possible source for or at least influence on an American rhetoric of purposeful mediation.

An obvious place to begin is William James's 1907 book *Pragmatism*, whose very subtitle "A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking" implies a mediating purpose for James's popular lectures, a mediation between the old

and the new. James famously defined pragmatism as a method of thinking and a theory of truth. The method looked to results, consequences of beliefs, ideas, actions; and truth was defined controversially as what works. "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons."<sup>12</sup> That last phrase provides an opening for teasing out the contours of a specifically *rhetorical* pragmatism: The true is the rhetorical compliment we give (the figurative label we posit) for whatever proves itself (argumentatively justifies itself through reasons) to be good in the way of belief. Put differently, to identify a specifically rhetorical pragmatism is to work out the way that pragmatism as a philosophical movement is a rhetorical way of thinking with a rhetorical theory of truth. As James explains his pragmatist approach more fully, he makes its strategy of purposeful mediation explicit. James calls pragmatism "a mediator and a reconciler," a "mediator between tough-mindedness and tender-mindedness," and a "mediator between empiricism and religion"<sup>13</sup> He describes pragmatism "as a mediating system" and offers "pragmatic philosophy" as "just the mediating way of thinking" his audience requires.<sup>14</sup>

We find this same mediating way of thinking and its embodiment in a rhetoric of mediation throughout the American pragmatist tradition. Pragmatism is an intellectual solution to a cultural problem, which means it is a pragmatic response to a question in a specific time and place. A typical problem or question for pragmatism arises from the public recognition of a widespread cultural conflict; and the typical pragmatist response is not to choose sides but to mediate. This mediating rhetorical strategy can be seen in James's *Pragmatism* in 1907 and almost a hundred years later in Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*. Interestingly, the conflicts

<sup>10</sup> Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. xi (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> A rhetorical hermeneutics focuses on the relation of rhetoric and interpretation and in one of its forms combines rhetorical pragmatism in philosophical theory with cultural rhetoric study in critical practice. See Steven Mailloux, *Rhetorical Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 3-18; and *Disciplinary Identities*, pp. 42-65.

<sup>12</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43, 129, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7, 26.

addressed by both thinkers involve religion. In James's case it is a conflict between Darwinian Science and Christian Religion; for Stout it is a dispute over the role of religion in a democratic polis. James addresses his problem by mediating between what he calls tough-minded and tender-minded mental make-ups; Stout's rhetoric mediates between liberal democratic secularists and what he calls the new anti-liberal traditionalists.

In *Democracy and Tradition* Stout proposes to resolve the dispute over the contemporary role of religion in the public sphere by arguing that pragmatism as (what he provocatively calls) "democratic traditionalism" makes room for religious voices in political deliberation.<sup>15</sup> Like James though less explicitly than Schiller, he makes use of rhetorical concepts and traditions all along the way. For Stout "culture is an enduring collection of social practices, embedded in institutions of a characteristic kind, reflected in specific habits and intuitions, and capable of giving rise to recognizable forms of human character."<sup>16</sup> One particular aspect of culture is central to Stout's mediating rhetorical strategy. That aspect is tradition: "a matter of enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct"; for example a democratic tradition "inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues."<sup>17</sup> Underlying these notions of *culture* and *tradition* is a theory of practices and a value given to particular rhetorical practices within certain traditions, such as democracy.

Stout's primary aim is to "make plain" how "a tradition of democratic reasoning, dispositions, and attitudes that the people have in common" serves as the "adhesive element in our sociality."<sup>18</sup> Stout thus claims that his "conception of the civic nation is pragmatic in the sense

that it focuses on *activities* [practices] held in common as constitutive of the political community."<sup>19</sup> But the practical activities of a democracy are not just procedural forms: "They are activities in which normative commitments are embedded as well as discussed. The commitments are substantive. They guide the discussion, but they are also constantly in dispute, subject to revision, and not fully determinate."<sup>20</sup> Stout gives as examples of texts that embody such democratic normative values the Bill of Rights, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Nineteenth Amendment, Lincoln's Second Inaugural, and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman." Stout advocates the rhetorical practices of public deliberation and notes the other social practices in which rhetorical activities are situated and which serve as topics of deliberation, such as voting and the electoral process.

Stout specifically takes up the question: What "is the role of free public reason in a political culture that includes conflicting religious conceptions of the good"?<sup>21</sup> To answer this question, he rhetorically focuses on "the discursive core of democratic culture,"<sup>22</sup> noting that "by highlighting the significance of public deliberation, democratic political arrangements bring to light their symbiotic relationship to a surrounding culture in which the shared discursive practices of the people are of primary importance."<sup>23</sup> Stout's rhetoric of purposeful mediation develops a pragmatist account of U.S. democratic culture, rhetorically analyzing both past mediated conflicts and present conflicts in need of mediation. In so doing, Stout notes the mediating strategies of others in the pragmatist tradition. For example, he notes how in an earlier time "Dewey sought a spiritual path between the extremes of militant atheism and arrogant traditionalism."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Armed with rhetorical pragmatist assumptions, Stout characterizes the current impasse within American democratic deliberation as a conflict between secular liberal political philosophers and religious-oriented, anti-liberal-democratic new traditionalists. Because of the discord resulting from religious diversity, “secular liberals,” he writes, “have strongly urged people to restrain themselves from bringing their religious commitments with them into the political sphere.” In contrast, “many religious people have grown frustrated at the unwillingness of the liberal elite to hear them out on their own terms, and have recently had much to say against the hypocrisies and biases of secularism.”<sup>25</sup> Stout’s mediating rhetoric, like James’s before him, argues for (what I am calling) a rhetorical pragmatism, one that “can transcend the current standoff between secular liberals and the new traditionalists – and do so by borrowing crucial insights from both sides.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, he argues against “the Manichean rhetoric of cultural warfare,”<sup>27</sup> and for the pragmatic rhetoric of conflict mediation, not complete resolution but rather respectful recognition of both basic disagreement and shared consensual values.

Such pragmatist mediation is a practical accomplishment sometimes aided by theoretical articulation. As practical accomplishment, overcoming conflict takes place in a democracy through public deliberation and development of character, that is, collectively through democratic consensus and individually through democratic virtue. As a rhetorical accomplishment within public deliberation, pragmatic mediation of conflict requires the development of consensual overlap, not prior overarching agreement about the content of abstract concepts and principles. It requires verbally holding others responsible to give reasons for their opinions but not restricting beforehand the kind of reasons (secular or religious) that can be used in the public sphere. For all citizens participating in democratic deliberation, Stout

recommends a specific kind of “conversation”: “an exchange of views in which the respective parties express their premises in as much detail as they see fit and in whatever idiom they wish, try to make sense of each other’s perspectives, and expose their own commitments to the possibility of criticism.”<sup>28</sup>

This practical, rhetorical accomplishment can be assisted by theoretical articulation, self-reflective commentary on both the substance and process of the ongoing accomplishment. Stout sees such metacommentary to be the special task of public philosophers, to whom Stout recommends adopting a pragmatist point of view. This pragmatist viewpoint sees the “function of moral principles with respect to the ethical life of a people” to be “essentially expressive, a matter of making explicit in the form of a claim a kind of commitment that would otherwise remain implicit and obscure.” The role of “public philosophy,” then, should be a rhetorically-mediating “exercise in expressive rationality.”<sup>29</sup> That is, public philosophers are intellectuals who express the reasons implicitly motivating citizens in their public deliberations. But we might just as easily characterize the public intellectual who performs this expressive theoretical function as a rhetorician. In fact, isn’t this public theoretical articulation an area where again the philosophy/rhetoric distinction (certainly the opposition) tends to collapse, and thus couldn’t we say that the pragmatist public intellectual is not just rhetorical in his or her mediating practice but also sophistic in theoretical orientation? Following Schiller’s interpretation of Protagoras, doesn’t a rhetorical pragmatist today assume the human-measure maxim (even when the appeal is to the divine) and try to discover and establish what rhetorical “devices make concordant” one citizen’s measures with those of fellow-citizens? Stout as a rhetorical pragmatist attempts to fulfill his role as public philosopher through the theoretical articulations of his book *Democracy and Tradition*. In so doing, he presents a sophistic rhetorical pragmatist framework for public

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

deliberation in a democracy, advocating a rhetorical strategy of purposeful mediation.

Let me conclude by returning to the academic and popular claim that President Obama is a pragmatist, in my view a rhetorical pragmatist. To date the most comprehensive study published on Obama's pragmatist roots is James T. Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*. A noted intellectual historian, Kloppenberg charts the marked influence of philosophical pragmatism on Obama's intellectual development from the readings and discussions in his Harvard Law School courses to his immersion in Deweyan progressive political thinking during his days as a Chicago community organizer and as a law professor at the University of Chicago.<sup>30</sup> Kloppenberg comments often on Obama's mediating style, his "commitments to philosophical pragmatism and deliberative democracy – to building support slowly, gradually, through compromise and painstaking consensus building."<sup>31</sup> Kloppenberg calls Obama "a principled partisan of democracy and pragmatism in the tradition of James and Dewey. He believes in the founders' ideals of equality and liberty. But he believes that achieving those goals requires working to forge agreement about forms of democratic experimentation, and he believes that those experiments must be followed by the critical assessment of results."<sup>32</sup>

Besides connecting Obama with the classical early pragmatists, Kloppenberg also mentions the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Cornel West and others call a Christian pragmatist.<sup>33</sup> In 2007 candidate Obama

referred to Niebuhr as one of his "favorite philosophers."<sup>34</sup> Asked what he got out of Niebuhr, Obama responded that he took away "the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism." Here we see the same mediating rhetoric, mediating between pessimism and optimism, between idealism and realism, that we find elsewhere throughout the American pragmatist tradition, including in Niebuhr's own book *The Irony of American History*, which, for example, praises the mediating strain of American thought "most perfectly expressed by James Madison" who "combined Christian realism in the interpretation of human motives and desires with Jefferson's passion for liberty."<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the most striking example of Obama's own pragmatist rhetoric of mediation involves his thoughtful response to the passionate rhetoric of Reverend Jeremiah Wright and his vociferous critics. In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama had described his admiration for Reverend Wright, who, he noted, was a reader of Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and black liberation theologians.<sup>36</sup> Then, famously and still controversially, Obama demonstrated his skill at mediating rhetoric in an 18 March 2008 speech, "A More Perfect Union," in which he (at least for the moment) refused to repudiate Wright despite his disagreement with his views. Throughout the speech, Obama tried to reconcile without dissolving many differences, many oppositions, not the least of which was that between Black anger and

<sup>30</sup> See James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 63-71. Also see Bart Schultz, "Obama's Political Philosophy: Pragmatism, Politics, and the University of Chicago," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 39 (2009), pp.127-73; and Robert Danisch, "Obama and the Pragmatist Tradition," unpublished manuscript.

<sup>31</sup> Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, p. 83.

<sup>32</sup> Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, p. 221-222.

<sup>33</sup> Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, pp. 22, 120, 250; Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A*

*Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 150-164.

<sup>34</sup> David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *New York Times* (26 April 2007), p. A25.

<sup>35</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952), p. 96.

<sup>36</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), p. 282.

White intolerance. Here is just one piece of Obama's mediating, unifying rhetoric about "America's improbable experiment in democracy": "I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction – towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren."<sup>37</sup>

Given the argument I am making that Obama can be viewed within a rhetorical pragmatist tradition, it is somewhat ironic that three years into his presidency the close fit between his rhetorical power and his mediating pragmatism is being questioned by some of his former supporters. In "The Pragmatic President" Fareed Zakaria writes that liberals are disappointed with President Obama "because of his persistent tendency to compromise."<sup>38</sup> Their criticism "stems from a liberal fantasy that if only the President would give a stirring speech, he would sweep the country along with the sheer power of his poetry." That is, prior to his election and soon after, his supporters marveled at the rhetorical power of his mediating progressive pragmatism. Now, some of those same people criticize Obama for giving up on the power of his rhetoric in the process of making pragmatic compromises. In contrast, Zakaria defends the President's record of accomplishments in today's highly polarized politics: "Obama is a centrist and a pragmatist who understands that in a country divided over core issues, you cannot make the best the enemy of the good." Thus, we might say, a pragmatist's mediating rhetoric is sometimes the only way to get something

done in difficult situations of extreme ideological partisanship.

Still, it is also worth noting the limits of mediating rhetoric within deliberative democracy, limits fully acknowledged by Obama in this passage from *The Audacity of Hope*:

Democratic deliberation might have been sufficient to expand the franchise to white men without property and eventually women; reason, argument, and American pragmatism might have eased the economic growing pains of a great nation and helped lessen religious and class tensions that would plague other nations. But deliberation alone could not provide the slave his freedom or cleanse America of its original sin. In the end, it was the sword that would sever his chains.<sup>39</sup>

In light of such historical examples, Obama the rhetorical pragmatist notes the limitations of rhetorical pragmatism and its rhetoric of purposeful mediation. He admits:

The best I can do in the face of our history is remind myself that it has not always been the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise, that has created the conditions for liberty. ... I'm reminded that deliberation and the constitutional order may sometimes be the luxury of the powerful, and that it has sometimes been the cranks, the zealots, the prophets, the agitators, and the unreasonable – in other words, the absolutists – that have fought for a new order. Knowing this, I can't summarily dismiss those possessed of similar certainty today – the antiabortion activist who pickets my town hall meeting, or the animal rights activist who raids a laboratory – no matter how deeply I disagree with their views. I am robbed even of the certainty of uncertainty – for sometimes absolute truths may well be absolute.<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, Obama turns back to the political figure with whom he has so often identified. He writes, "I'm left then with Lincoln, who like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our

<sup>37</sup> Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," in: *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union"*, ed. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), pp. 237-238.

<sup>38</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Pragmatic President," *Time* (22 August 2011), p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 97.



democracy and the limits of such deliberation.”<sup>41</sup> Not forgetting such sobering reminders, rhetorical pragmatists will surely continue their strategic advocacy of purposeful mediation, further developing the long pragmatist tradition of a “mediating way of thinking” within specialized intellectual debates as well as the popular politics of our deliberative democracies.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

## COVER ILLUSTRATION BY

**Krzysztof Skarbek**

*“Pewien pan w drodze do pracy czyta nieciekawą gazetę”  
(‘A Certain Gentleman Reads an Uninteresting Newspaper on His Way to Work’)*

Krzysztof Skarbek graduated in 1985 in painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, Poland, under the guidance of Professor Zbigniew Karpiński. Currently, he is professor and head of the Painting Studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław. He specializes in easel painting and video, installation, and performance art. After graduating, he has participated in about 260 joint exhibitions and numerous art festivals, and has had 51 solo exhibitions in Poland and abroad. Skarbek also serves as Vice Dean of the Faculty of Sculpture and Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław.



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